

Women as Agents of Peace: An Analytical Study of Grassroots Peacebuilding Initiatives in Meghalaya

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Abstract: *The participation of women in peacebuilding has increasingly been recognized as a critical factor in achieving sustainable and inclusive peace, particularly in conflict-prone and ethnically diverse regions. This paper explores the role of women as agents of grassroots peace in Meghalaya, India, emphasizing how their localized initiatives contribute to social cohesion, conflict resolution, and community resilience. The study examines three key dimensions: (i) the mechanisms through which women construct and sustain localized forms of peace beyond formal state frameworks, (ii) the influence of matrilineal social structures, cultural identity, and community networks on women's approaches to conflict mediation, and (iii) the transformative potential and limitations of women-led initiatives in shaping policy discourse and inter-community trust. Findings indicate that women leverage moral authority, kinship networks, and culturally embedded practices to mediate disputes, foster dialogue, and restore relational harmony. Despite their significant contributions, institutional and structural constraints often limit the formal recognition of their efforts. By centering women's agency within indigenous and participatory frameworks, the study highlights the importance of integrating culturally grounded, gender-sensitive approaches into broader peacebuilding strategies, offering insights for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners alike.*

Keywords: Women's peacebuilding, Grassroots initiatives, Matriliney, Meghalaya, Vernacular peace, Conflict resolution, Gender and community, Indigenous knowledge

1. Introduction

The participation of women in peacebuilding has emerged as a critical dimension of global peace and conflict studies, particularly after the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (UN, 2000). Contemporary scholarship recognizes that sustainable peace cannot be achieved without the inclusion of women's voices, perspectives, and leadership in peace processes (Manchanda, 2005; Pankhurst, 2016). In many parts of the Global South, and especially within indigenous and conflict-prone societies, women's grassroots initiatives have become crucial in mediating disputes, rebuilding community trust, and fostering social reconciliation (Saikia, 2024; Bothra, 2024). Within this global discourse, the experiences of women in Northeast India a region marked by ethnic pluralism, identity-based tensions, and prolonged political marginalization offer a unique site for studying localized practices of peacebuilding (Kolås, 2014; PRIO, 2023).

Meghalaya, one of the states in India's northeastern region, presents a particularly compelling case due to its matrilineal social order and strong traditions of women's participation in community life. The Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo societies of Meghalaya historically accord women central roles in familial and social structures, yet their visibility in formal politics and decision-making remains limited (Baruah, 2019; North East Network, 2022). Despite this paradox, women in Meghalaya have been instrumental in grassroots peacebuilding through informal networks, church-based organizations, and local councils that emphasize negotiation, reconciliation, and restorative justice (MCRG, 2021; Saikia, 2024). Their interventions are often characterized by indigenous values of communal harmony, moral responsibility, and consensus-building, which differ significantly from the bureaucratic and security-centric approaches often employed by the state (Bothra, 2024; Manchanda, 2005).

Existing studies on peace and conflict in Northeast India have predominantly focused on insurgency movements, ethnic violence, and the role of the state and non-state actors, often sidelining women's agency in sustaining everyday peace (Kolås, 2014; Misra, 2016). Even when women are included, they are frequently portrayed as victims rather than as active agents of transformation (Saikia, 2024). However, emerging feminist scholarship argues that women's contributions to peace are embedded in the everyday practices of care, dialogue, and collective action what can be termed "vernacular peacebuilding" (Richmond, 2011; Paffenholz, 2018). This framework allows an understanding of peace not merely as the absence of conflict but as a dynamic process of rebuilding trust, relationships, and social cohesion at the grassroots level.

Furthermore, situating women's grassroots peacebuilding in Meghalaya within broader theoretical debates underscores the need to re-examine the epistemological foundations of peace and conflict research itself. Traditional peace studies have often privileged state-centric narratives and formal institutions, thereby marginalizing community-based and gendered forms of peace agency (Cockburn, 2013; Enloe, 2014). Feminist scholars argue that such frameworks overlook the "everyday politics of peace," where women's roles as mediators, caregivers, and social organizers redefine the boundaries between the private and the political (Tickner & True, 2018). In Meghalaya, where social life is deeply rooted in clan networks and customary law, women's peace initiatives frequently operate in spaces unrecognized by formal governance structures but remain vital to the maintenance of social equilibrium (Nongbri, 2020; NEN, 2022). These community-based efforts ranging from church-led peace dialogues to women's collectives addressing inter-tribal tensions reflect a hybrid peacebuilding model that blends indigenous cultural values with contemporary understandings of justice and inclusivity (Saikia, 2024; Richmond & Mac Ginty, 2015). Examining these practices

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contributes not only to understanding the gendered dimensions of peace in Northeast India but also to expanding the conceptual horizons of peacebuilding scholarship by emphasizing local agency, cultural knowledge, and intersectional resilience in postcolonial contexts (Paffenholz, 2018; Bothra, 2024).

2. Objective of the study

- a) To critically examine how women's grassroots peace initiatives in Meghalaya construct and sustain localized forms of peace that differ from formal state-led or institutionalized peacebuilding frameworks.
- b) To analyse the ways in which cultural identity, matrilineal social structures, and community networks in Meghalaya shape women's approaches to conflict mediation and social reconciliation.
- c) To evaluate the transformative potential and limitations of women-led grassroots peacebuilding efforts in influencing policy discourse, social cohesion, and inter-community trust in post-conflict or tension-prone areas of Meghalaya.

3. Methodology

The present study is based on a qualitative and analytical approach, using secondary sources of data to explore the role of women as agents of peace in grassroots peacebuilding initiatives in Meghalaya. Relevant information has been collected from books, peer-reviewed journal articles, research reports, policy documents, and publications from organizations such as the North East Network (NEN), the Manipur Research Centre for Global Studies (MCRG), and UN Women. The collected materials were carefully reviewed and analyzed thematically to understand how women contribute to peacebuilding through community-based activities and indigenous practices. This method helps in presenting a comprehensive understanding of women's peace initiatives in Meghalaya within a broader theoretical and regional context.

4. Discussion

a) Localized Peacebuilding Beyond the State: Women's Grassroots Initiatives in Meghalaya

The discourse on peacebuilding in conflict-prone societies has increasingly shifted from state-centric paradigms toward community-oriented approaches that value local agency and indigenous knowledge systems. In the context of Meghalaya, this shift is vividly reflected in the ways women have emerged as key architects of localized peace, often outside formal institutional frameworks. Unlike top-down, bureaucratic mechanisms of conflict resolution, women's grassroots peace initiatives in Meghalaya are characterized by their participatory, culturally embedded, and relationship-oriented methods of restoring social harmony (Saikia, 2024; Bothra, 2024). These initiatives emphasize dialogue, moral persuasion, and restorative justice, drawing legitimacy not from state authority but from their deep rootedness in community life and traditional values (Manchanda, 2005; Kolås, 2014).

Women's collectives, church organizations, and self-help groups have played an instrumental role in mediating local conflicts whether related to land disputes, ethnic tensions, or inter-village disagreements. Their strategies typically operate through informal governance structures such as the *Dorbar Shnong* (village councils) or church-based peace committees, where women act as facilitators of communication and reconciliation (Nongbri, 2020; North East Network [NEN], 2022). These spaces often provide an alternative to state institutions, which are sometimes viewed as distant or ineffective in addressing grassroots grievances. The success of such initiatives lies in their relational approach to peace, focusing on the restoration of trust and social cohesion rather than on punitive measures (Richmond & Mac Ginty, 2015). This form of peacebuilding represents what Richmond (2011) describes as "*post-liberal*" or "*hybrid peace*" a fusion of indigenous cultural practices with the principles of gender equality and social justice.

The matrilineal structure of Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo societies further influences the character of women's participation in peacebuilding. While matriliney does not automatically translate into gender equality, it provides women with social legitimacy and moral authority in community life (Baruah, 2019). This cultural foundation enables women to intervene in local conflicts with credibility and empathy, often positioning them as mediators who prioritize communal stability over personal or political gain (Nongbri, 2020). Their role reflects a form of vernacular peacebuilding that operates through kinship networks, social reciprocity, and shared responsibility values that resonate deeply within Meghalaya's indigenous worldview (Paffenholz, 2018; Saikia, 2024).

While women's grassroots peace initiatives in Meghalaya have demonstrated significant success in mediating local disputes and nurturing social cohesion, they often operate within complex socio-political constraints. Despite the matrilineal social structure, women's participation in formal decision-making bodies such as the *Dorbar Shnong* remains restricted, as traditional village councils are predominantly male-dominated in practice (Nongkynrih, 2015; Baruah, 2019). This structural limitation reflects a broader gendered paradox where women hold symbolic and cultural power but lack institutional authority to influence policy or governance outcomes (Phukon, 2021). Consequently, their contributions to peacebuilding frequently occur in informal or semi-formal spaces that remain invisible to mainstream policy frameworks (Tickner & True, 2018). Such marginalization not only undermines the recognition of women's agency but also restricts the scalability and sustainability of community-led peace efforts. Feminist scholars argue that this invisibility stems from patriarchal norms embedded within both traditional and state institutions, which fail to acknowledge the political significance of women's everyday peace practices (Cockburn, 2013; Enloe, 2014). Therefore, there is a need to reframe peacebuilding discourses in Meghalaya to encompass the lived experiences and gendered knowledge systems that inform women's collective action at the grassroots.

Integrating women's grassroots peacebuilding into broader governance and policy frameworks could significantly enhance the inclusivity and effectiveness of peace processes

in Meghalaya and the wider Northeast region. Scholars such as Paffenholz (2018) and Richmond (2011) emphasize that durable peace emerges from hybrid frameworks that bridge the gap between local practices and formal institutions. In this context, state actors, civil society organizations, and international agencies should collaborate with local women's networks to institutionalize mechanisms for dialogue, training, and community development that are gender-sensitive and culturally grounded (PRIO, 2023; MCRG, 2021). Initiatives such as participatory rural governance, gender mainstreaming in conflict resolution programs, and the establishment of women's peace committees at the district and village levels can provide platforms for sustained engagement and policy influence (NEN, 2022; Saikia, 2024). Furthermore, recognizing women's contributions through documentation, funding, and capacity-building efforts can help transform their informal peace practices into recognized forms of "local diplomacy." Such measures would not only amplify women's voices but also enrich the broader peacebuilding architecture in Meghalaya with indigenous perspectives rooted in care, community, and cultural continuity (Bothra, 2024; Pankhurst, 2016).

b) Matriliney, Culture, and Community: The Socio-Cultural Foundations of Women's Peacebuilding in Meghalaya

The matrilineal social system of Meghalaya constitutes one of the most distinctive cultural frameworks in India and significantly shapes women's roles in community life and conflict mediation. Among the Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo tribes, lineage and inheritance are traced through the mother, and the youngest daughter (Ka Khadduh among the Khasis) inherits ancestral property and is responsible for the care of aged parents and the continuity of the family line (Nongkynrih, 2015; Phukon, 2021). This system not only accords women economic and familial significance but also positions them as moral and social custodians of kinship relations. Although matriliney does not necessarily ensure gender equality or political empowerment, it provides women with cultural legitimacy and social credibility that strengthen their authority in community-level peace interventions (Baruah, 2019). As a result, women in Meghalaya play crucial roles in nurturing communal harmony, resolving disputes, and facilitating reconciliation through the moral influence they wield within their families and neighbourhoods (NEN, 2022; Saikia, 2024).

Cultural identity and indigenous values deeply inform women's peacebuilding practices in the region. In the traditional worldview of the Khasi-Jaintia and Garo societies, community well-being (*ka bha ka imlang ka sahang*) is inseparable from moral order and social balance. Peace, therefore, is conceived not merely as the absence of violence but as the maintenance of relational harmony within the community (Kolås, 2014; Bothra, 2024). Women's interventions are grounded in this ethos emphasizing dialogue, forgiveness, and the restoration of social ties rather than punishment or coercion. Through church fellowships, women's wings of local organizations, and informal support networks, women have developed culturally embedded mechanisms for conflict mediation that prioritize empathy and collective responsibility (Nongbri, 2020; Richmond, 2011). Their approach resonates with feminist notions of

"everyday peace," where care and cooperation function as transformative political practices (Cockburn, 2013; Paffenholz, 2018).

The role of women in peacebuilding in Meghalaya is also strengthened by the communal and participatory nature of local governance institutions. The Dorbar Shnong (village council) and church-based associations, while historically male-dominated, often rely on women's informal networks for moral legitimacy and social enforcement of community norms (Nongkynrih, 2015). Women act as intermediaries in cases of family disputes, inter-community tensions, and even in the aftermath of ethnic clashes. For instance, during periods of inter-ethnic tension between Khasi and non-tribal communities, women's collectives and church groups have organized prayer meetings, dialogue circles, and peace marches to de-escalate hostility and reaffirm communal coexistence (MCRG, 2021; PRIO, 2023). These interventions reflect what Richmond and Mac Ginty (2015) term "hybrid peacebuilding," where traditional moral systems intersect with contemporary ideas of human rights and social justice. Matriliney, while offering women symbolic authority, also generates a distinctive form of social responsibility that motivates their peace-oriented activism. Women are often seen as the "keepers of clan honour" and the moral backbone of the household, which translates into an expectation that they will maintain social cohesion and mediate conflicts within the extended family and community (Phukon, 2021; Baruah, 2019). This cultural expectation, while reinforcing gendered roles, simultaneously empowers women to act as informal diplomats and negotiators in moments of social tension. Their peacebuilding efforts thus emerge from a culturally specific form of gendered citizenship one that links familial duty with civic responsibility (Enloe, 2014; Saikia, 2024). Moreover, women's collective actions through self-help groups, cooperative societies, and community associations extend beyond conflict resolution, addressing the structural roots of conflict such as poverty, unemployment, and social exclusion (NEN, 2022; Bothra, 2024).

The interlinkages between education, religion, and community leadership have further strengthened women's roles as peacebuilders in Meghalaya. Christian institutions, particularly the Presbyterian and Catholic churches, have historically been key spaces for women's social participation and capacity-building (Nongbri, 2020; NEN, 2022). Church-based women's fellowships such as the *Ka Jingiaseng Kynthei* among the Khasi and Jaintia and the *Mahila Samiti* among the Garo provide platforms for collective prayer, mutual support, and social service, which often extend into peace and reconciliation efforts at the village level (MCRG, 2021; Saikia, 2024). These organizations function as semi-formal governance spaces where women exercise leadership, engage in dialogue, and promote moral education that emphasizes forgiveness and coexistence (Phukon, 2021; Bothra, 2024). Furthermore, access to education facilitated by missionary schools and women's literacy movements has expanded women's awareness of their rights and enhanced their negotiation skills, enabling them to act as mediators between communities and formal institutions (Baruah, 2019; Pankhurst, 2016).

Equally important is the emerging intergenerational dimension of women's peace activism in Meghalaya. Younger women, often educated and digitally connected, are expanding the scope of grassroots peacebuilding by integrating gender justice, environmental sustainability, and human rights into community dialogues (PRIO, 2023; Tickner & True, 2018). Initiatives such as youth peace clubs, women-led NGOs, and inter-community workshops on conflict transformation have fostered a culture of active citizenship that bridges traditional and modern approaches to peace (NEN, 2022; Paffenholz, 2018).

Another crucial dimension of women's peacebuilding in Meghalaya lies in their capacity to weave together cultural memory and collective healing. The oral traditions, folk narratives, and community rituals of the Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo societies often encode lessons of reconciliation, coexistence, and forgiveness values that women actively transmit across generations (Nongbri, 2020; Mawrie, 2023). Through songs, folktales, and storytelling circles, women articulate moral narratives that discourage vengeance and reinforce the shared responsibility for maintaining harmony within and between clans. Such practices reflect what Lederach (1997) describes as the "moral imagination" of peacebuilding the ability to envision connections between adversaries and to sustain dialogue through cultural expressions. In the post-conflict contexts of Meghalaya, women have used community feasts, interfaith prayer meetings, and indigenous rituals to heal social fractures created by ethnic violence and displacement (MCRG, 2021; Saikia, 2024). These cultural practices serve both as psychological reconciliation mechanisms and as performative reaffirmations of social unity. The participatory and symbolic nature of these events not only restores trust but also embeds peace within the moral fabric of everyday life, thereby transforming cultural spaces into zones of resilience and solidarity (Richmond & Mitchell, 2012; Cockburn, 2013).

c) Transformative Potentials and Constraints: Policy Influence and Social Cohesion through Women-Led Peacebuilding in Meghalaya

Women-led grassroots peacebuilding initiatives in Meghalaya demonstrate remarkable transformative potential in fostering social cohesion, rebuilding inter-community trust, and shaping a more inclusive policy discourse on peace and development. These efforts often function as silent yet resilient undercurrents of social transformation in post-conflict or tension-prone areas where formal state mechanisms are either absent or distrusted. By working at the intersection of moral authority, social empathy, and cultural legitimacy, women's collectives have helped to reconstruct fractured social relationships and promote narratives of coexistence grounded in shared cultural values (Paffenholz, 2018; Saikia, 2024). Their peace initiatives transcend the traditional boundaries of activism, incorporating welfare, education, and livelihood interventions as integral components of social reconciliation. Through such multi-dimensional engagement, women contribute not only to conflict mitigation but also to building resilient communities capable of preventing future tensions (Richmond, 2011; Bothra, 2024).

A key transformative potential of women's grassroots activism lies in its capacity to influence local governance and policy discourse. Although women in Meghalaya are often excluded from formal political institutions like the Dorbar Shnong, their community-based actions have gradually shaped public attitudes toward gender-inclusive decision-making (Nongbri, 2020). Initiatives by organizations such as the North East Network (NEN), Impulse NGO Network, and Women for Integrated Sustainable Empowerment (WISE) have provided platforms where women articulate community concerns on safety, justice, and social equity (NEN, 2022). Their advocacy for domestic violence awareness, anti-trafficking laws, and inclusive development policies has begun to influence local administrative priorities and civil society dialogue (PRIO, 2023). By localizing global norms of peace and gender justice, these organizations serve as bridges between grassroots realities and institutional frameworks, contributing to what Hudson (2017) describes as the "feminist peace dividend" the notion that women's inclusion leads to more durable and equitable peace outcomes.

Women's collectives in Meghalaya have also contributed significantly to restoring inter-community trust, especially in the aftermath of ethnic tensions between tribal and non-tribal populations. Their initiatives focus on reconciliation through dialogue circles, interfaith prayers, and community service rather than through political confrontation (MCRG, 2021; Baruah, 2019). Such interventions have been instrumental in humanizing conflicting groups and creating shared spaces for interaction, thereby fostering what Lederach (1997) calls the "moral imagination" the capacity to envision a web of relationships that includes the former enemy. Women's leadership in organizing cross-cultural peace dialogues, particularly in regions like Ri-Bhoi and East Khasi Hills, demonstrates how grassroots activism can rebuild social bridges where state interventions have struggled to achieve legitimacy. The relational and empathetic modes of women's peacebuilding thereby offer a bottom-up model of conflict transformation that complements formal peace initiatives (Cockburn, 2013; Richmond & Mac Ginty, 2015).

Despite these transformative contributions, women's peacebuilding efforts in Meghalaya encounter multiple constraints that limit their long-term influence on institutional policy and structural inequalities. First, as stated earlier, traditional governance institutions remain largely patriarchal, with women often excluded from formal decision-making processes in the Dorbar Shnong or district-level councils (Nongkynrih, 2015). This exclusion undermines the translation of women's peace efforts into sustained policy change, leaving their contributions largely invisible in the formal peace architecture (Tickner & True, 2018). Second, resource limitations, lack of organizational infrastructure, and the absence of state funding further constrain the scalability of grassroots peace initiatives (Pankhurst, 2016). Many women-led organizations rely heavily on volunteerism and informal networks, which, while effective in crisis mediation, are difficult to sustain over time without institutional backing (Saikia, 2024).

Furthermore, the coexistence of traditional norms and modern governance frameworks generates tensions for women's activism. While matriliney grants symbolic status to women as

custodians of clan heritage, it does not necessarily dismantle gender hierarchies in public decision-making or political participation (Phukon, 2021; Baruah, 2019). Women peacebuilders must therefore navigate a delicate balance between cultural conformity and social transformation challenging gender biases while respecting indigenous traditions that underpin community legitimacy. Scholars such as Paffenholz (2018) and Manchanda (2005) argue that this negotiation between structure and agency defines the distinctiveness of women's peacebuilding in South Asia, where transformation occurs incrementally through dialogue, persuasion, and the reshaping of social norms rather than through overt confrontation.

At a broader level, the limited recognition of women's informal diplomacy by policymakers underscores a critical gap between grassroots practices and institutional peace frameworks. While national and state policies on gender and peace acknowledge the role of women, they rarely incorporate indigenous and community-driven perspectives into planning and implementation (Misra, 2016; UN Women, 2023). The inclusion of women's voices in formal peace processes, policymaking bodies, and local governance structures remains essential to ensuring that peacebuilding becomes not only participatory but also contextually rooted. Institutionalizing these practices would require structural reforms such as gender quotas in village councils, state funding for women's organizations, and the mainstreaming of peace education in community programs (Paffenholz, 2018; Hudson, 2017). Such measures would help bridge the divide between informal and formal spheres of peacebuilding, allowing women's initiatives to exert more tangible policy influence.

5. Conclusion

This study underscores the critical role of women as agents of grassroots peace in Meghalaya, highlighting the ways in which localized, culturally embedded initiatives contribute to social cohesion, conflict resolution, and community resilience. By examining the interplay of matrilineal structures, cultural identity, and community networks, the research demonstrates that women's interventions extend beyond conventional notions of peacebuilding, encompassing moral leadership, relational negotiation, and restorative practices. The study further reveals the transformative potential of women-led initiatives in shaping inter-community trust and influencing local policy discourse, while also identifying structural and institutional constraints that limit the scalability and formal recognition of their efforts.

The findings affirm that sustainable peace in conflict-prone and ethnically diverse societies cannot be achieved without centering women's agency, indigenous knowledge, and community-driven approaches. Women in Meghalaya exemplify a hybrid model of peacebuilding, where traditional moral authority intersects with contemporary principles of gender equality and social justice, offering an alternative and complementary pathway to state-centric interventions. By documenting and critically analyzing these practices, the study contributes to both academic scholarship and policy discourse, emphasizing the need for inclusive governance,

institutional support, and recognition of women's informal diplomacy as a vital component of peacebuilding.

The research highlights that fostering gender-inclusive, culturally grounded, and participatory peace processes is essential not only for sustaining local harmony but also for advancing broader goals of social justice, resilience, and equitable development. Strengthening the synergy between grassroots initiatives and formal peace structures can transform Meghalaya's peace architecture into one that is both sustainable and reflective of the lived realities, knowledge systems, and moral agency of its women.

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