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CURATED VOICES

Looking at Post Conflict Reconstruction Through a Gender Lens

Gayatri Misra

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ABSTRACT

In the North-Eastern states of India, where ethnic violence and separatist movements repeatedly disrupt the lives of civilians, gendered roles during and post conflict become increasingly visible. With warfare creating new security challenges, women face the struggle to not only provide for themselves and their family but also their community at large. The general lack of a livelihood, socio-economic resources, and political power, combined with gender-specific patriarchal norms, further marginalise women in the society. Women are not only the most affected group during a war but also crucial players in peacebuilding. Despite which, governmental and patriarchal structures assign women a passive place in private and public spheres. The asymmetries in warfare, in terms of the methods and victims of violence, reveal the incongruencies of conflict and post-conflict negotiation.

This paper seeks to explore how women use their traditional roles as mother, housewives, sister and non-traditional ones as combatants, to negotiate private and public spaces. The research examines how women as victims or agents are not a homogenous entity, and merit an analysis that looks beyond a universal lens of gender mainstreaming. Women play multiple roles at multiple junctures of time and space, redefining their relationship with various societal groups. How women negotiate their everyday spaces forms a crucial aspect in understanding agency and empowerment.

INTRODUCTION

With the ever-changing nature of armed conflict, the politics of violence has taken a new form in recent years. Civilians are major targets in an armed conflict with women, in particular, being the most abused and affected in ways that traverse beyond the immediate combat casualties (Gill 2005). While physical abuse directly results from armed violence, women in conflict areas experience violence on various intersecting levels. Such experiences ultimately expose the power dynamics within which women have to recover and negotiate.

The North-Eastern states in India are rife with decades of ethnic violence and separatist movements. Starting from the 1970s, several insurgencies have ravaged the states in multiple ways while the post-conflict reconstruction is full of ambiguities. The 'outsiders' problem¹ and the question of who is indigenous, and hence should have access to the land and its resources, is an issue central to the ethnic violence in Assam (Baruah 1999).

The armed violence in the region began before British colonisation, with the Ahom² fighting back the Mughals between 1615 and 1682. However, the British brought in new forms of resistance, most notably in the hills of present-day Nagaland and Mizoram. As Assam fell under British administration, the latter segregated the state by drawing internal boundaries and including Naga areas within Assam (Baruah 1999). The Naga³ and the Mizo insurgencies have their roots in a form of subnationalism that pans beyond Indian nationalism, with language and ethnic identity being at the centre of their ideas of nationhood. The fight for a separate nation remained unresolved, and what was negotiated further created ethnic fissures in these regions.

These fissures led to demand for political and cultural autonomy among other groups, such as the Bodos and the Karbis, creating a strand of sub-nationalism rooted in an antagonism towards 'Assamese hegemony', followed by the anti-

¹ Assam's population composition changed significantly as immigrants, mainly from East Bengal, arrived in the state in large numbers. Immigration initially began with the demand for labour during British rule and continued well after partition. The economic revolution of Assam brought in more outsiders, further depleting the resources of the land. The situation led to a severe and serious crisis between the indigenous and Bengali immigrants, with the latter often referred to as 'outsiders'.

² The Ahom dynasty ruled Assam for nearly six decades starting from 1228 A.D. until 1826 A.D. The Tai prince, Sukaphaa, established the rule and is revered as one of the most glorious chapters in Assamese history; until the Burmese invaded Assam who eventually fell under the British rule. East India Company's annexation of Assam then assimilated the state into pan-Indian nationalism.

³ The Naga insurgency is one of the oldest movements in the North East. It led the Civil Disobedience Movement, and in 1963 realised the struggle for the state of Nagaland.

foreigner movement. As different NE languages became a crucial tool of identity formation, they also led to the othering of groups who didn't speak it. The division between the 'indigenous' and the 'outsider' increased due to the large-scale immigration of 'foreigners' from neighbouring countries, especially the East. It led to continuous ethnic conflicts resulting in deaths and displacement (Baruah 1999).

This ethnic unrest and the ensuing negotiations between the political leaders and the communities poses significant conundrums. Restoring peace and resolving conflicts paves the way for the development and restoration of human rights. This functions in a space where the idea of hegemonic masculinity reigns in every sphere, thereby marginalising all other facets of participation in the movement.

WOMEN'S REALITIES IN ARMED CONFLICT

The question of the politics of women is non-existent in the larger reality of these insurgencies. The reality of war is male-centric and that of power hierarchies. Exclusionary politics keep women away from the structural arrangements that determine the beneficiaries of post-war 'gains' and those who negotiate the terms of said benefits. Women's reality and experiences are tokenised, relegating them only as entities where violence is afflicted. The ideas of nationhood are intrinsically linked to notions of motherhood and the chastity of women. Often women are viewed as passive objects in need of a 'protector' (Banerjee 2014).

However, women are engaged in negotiations that weave beyond ideas of justice and nationhood. Women's engagement is crucial to look at because they ultimately shoulder the repercussions of war. One such shouldering occurs through women-headed households during armed conflict (Devi 2016: 71) where women often have to defy traditional social roles to provide for their families. The paper aims to understand the negotiations, local realities, and everyday experiences of these women. All of which forms a significant part of the reconstruction process and the future of communities. While doing so, the research explores the woman's shrinking agency due to the myriad of roles they play. Even ones that are conflicting. These roles come to shape women's reality within the larger patriarchal society that they inhabit.

'Women' Is Not A Homogenous Category

In examining how women create spaces for themselves in a war-ravaged society, there is a need to move beyond identifying women as a homogenous category, as is present in pan-Indian Nationalism. There are significant differences between the north-eastern [NE] states and the rest of the country. Women are often perceived to be more empowered in the NE states. The absence of oppressive gendered practises like dowry combined with the prevalence of matriarchy, most women in NE states are considered holding positions of power and authority, at least in the familial contexts. However, this perception is far from reality.

North Eastern women face several layers of violence and oppression (Baker 2013). One such onerous reality is the one brought forth by the Armed Forces

Special Powers Act [AFSPA]⁴. The AFSPA has been in place in the NE since 1958. What started as a short-term deployment measure to deal with the separatist violence in the NE has persisted for more than seven decades. Its powers and exercises unchecked and unabated. The armed forces got away with committing heinous crimes against civilians through the decades owing to AFSPA's 'special powers' protection (Bezbaruah 2018). Rape, abduction, looting, and murder are permissible under AFSPA and are therefore rampant in the zones declared 'disturbed areas'. For instance, the murder of Manipur's Thangjam Manorama Devi sent shockwaves across the states. Manorama Devi was a member of the Peoples' Liberation Army, an armed revolutionary group of Manipur. Her dead body was found on 11 July 2004, with numerous bullet wounds lodged into her body, including her vagina, evidencing sexual assault (McDuié-Ra 2012).

Another example that violence against women in the public eye occurred in December 1970, when the military raped and molested several women in Manipur's Cheswezy village. Such disturbing events are replete across the region, very few of them are formally documented while a majority of them go unreported, thus allowing the military to enjoy impunity (Devi 2014). These instances point to the culture of violence against women and their continued victimisation (McDuié-Ra 2012: 322) at the hands of the military but also within their own homes and as a result of nation-building and development. Under such circumstances, women are only seen in positions of submission and victimhood with no agency.

On the flip side, the experience of female militant combatants may repudiate the notion of women as fragile beings in need of constant protection. Instead, female combatants serve a crucial role in the armed insurgencies alongside their male counterparts.

Looking At Women Combatants

The female combatants of the United Liberation Front of Assam [ULFA]⁵ are often placed, along with problems concerning their agentive powers and motives, in the larger spectrum of a Swadhin Axom or Independent Assam. United Liberation Front of Assam had its genesis in 1979 in Sivasagar of Assam, intending to create an Assam free from Indian colonialism. ULFA's controversial ideas, tactics for economic liberation, and development of Assam led to staunch opposition from the state (Baruah 1999). The names of women cadres of ULFA, however, rarely surface. Moral (2013) writes that female combatants' role was dismissed as they were left in the dark after the ceasefire declaration and the negotiations thereafter. One of the notable combatants, Pranati Deka, served as ULFA's

⁴ The Armed Forces Special Powers Act 1958, first introduced during the Naga insurgency in specific parts of India. The Act gives special immunity to the armed forces, shielding them from getting arrested for various human rights violations over the years. Despite numerous protests to revoke this draconian law, the Act continues to exist in Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, and a few districts of Arunachal Pradesh.

⁵ ULFA was formed in 1979 in the Sivasagar District of Assam, under the leadership of Paresh Barua and Arbind Rajkhowa. Their goal was a sovereign Assam. While the initial phases of the group inclined towards the Assam movement, it took on a more radical and violent character. The negotiations between the ULFA and the state have continued with temporary solutions. A permanent political settlement remains unachieved.

cultural secretary until her arrest in 2003. Other notable ex-militant women include Kalpana Neog, Minu Gogoi, Tezimala Rabha, among many others. However, their names never bear occurrence during peace negotiations⁶, neither mentioned in post-war homages. It is crucial to consider women's positions, both within and outside the movement, their relations, and their allegiances to various actors. Only after such a context is established, can the understanding of agency and empowerment within these structural and relational changes come in (Moral 2013).

Contrary to popular perception, the position of female ULFA cadres in the eyes of their male counterparts is that of a subordinate in many aspects. ULFA's ideology influenced many female combatants from a young age, resulting in them joining the organisation later on (Moral 2013). Often, they were the partners or spouses of the male members of the ULFA (ibid). However, women combatants do not have the same active roles as their male counterparts. Even though trained in guerrilla warfare tactics, women did not serve in the frontlines or were part of any encounters. ULFA's patriarchal outlook on gender discouraged women from combat and also from rising through the ranks. Instead, the organisation pushed women to take up traditionally feminine roles such as that of informers, cooks, bearers of rations, etc.

In 'Women in the Time of Conflict: the case of Nagaland', Preeti Gill (2005) notes how patriarchal norms also determined the repercussions of war differently for men and women. Rape is the most immediate form of violence inflicted on women followed by murder. Men are either killed or die by suicide. Therefore, while male deaths are often hailed as martyrs, the nature of violence women face shames and socially excludes them. Within these double standards, women in conflict situations negotiate their everyday spaces.

The ethnic conflict in NE is an ongoing one. Even states with ceasefires or peace negotiations in place do not see an end to the conflicts. Moral (2014: 68) states, "post-war is only used as a euphemism for a period that embodies different degrees of being at war", and might not signal an end of armed conflict. Thus, post-war reconstruction is an evolving reality where women come to occupy a central position as a result of their male counterparts' deaths or abduction.

Different Post-War Realities

Traditionally, the categorisation of North-East's women as combatants and non-combatants blurs in their post-war realities. This broad grouping of women, irrespective of their personal histories, is a tactic of state authorities to negotiate and administer the conflict. Such binaries are a flawed outlook since the lived experiences of combatants are significantly different from the non-combatants'. The former has greater difficulty integrating into mainstream society as a result of years of living on the fringes of war. Faced with social stigma and gender discrimination, ex-combatant women bear the double burden of being a woman and an ex-militant. They do not enjoy the same privileges and rehabilitation

⁶ Women's participation in ULFA is often seen as "accidental activism" (Banerjee 2014). The organisation's strong patriarchal leanings, despite its many women members, relegated women to subservient roles.

benefits that the government provides the ex-male militants. Relief packages for women's reintegration are often ambiguous and short lived. Even though economic help may add up initially, they are withdrawn by the state and women are forced to sustain on their own. This is further entrenched by social stigma that often surrounds these female ex-combatants. Inversely, since men are at the centre of militant politics, they negotiate their terms of surrender thus allowing them a more easier post-war transitional process. Such gendered rehabilitation pushes women into abject poverty and subjects them to discrimination for the rest of their lives.

While these ex-combatants lead lives of exclusion and stigma, those who do not actively engage in war still live an equally tough reality. Conflicts give way to women-headed households. Widows, half-widows⁷, and mothers who have lost their sons to wars form the majority of this category. War and post-war bring in different realities for this set of women and, in turn, a different path to negotiation.

As women get involved in the negotiation process, they experience different vulnerabilities depending on their role and allegiances. With nation-building still largely a male domain, women consistently act behind the curtain to negotiate everyday spaces. McDuire-Ra (2018: 221) through his idea of 'sensitive spaces' explains how women move across disturbed areas more easily than men do for the latter are often under the constant gaze of the military. While this does not directly imply resistance to military conflict, it shows how mobility itself comes to be redefined for different people in these militarised zones (ibid). Justice and peace take on a different meaning for them compared to their male counterparts. This everydayness of peacebuilding is crucial to consider because women take on a more active role in the private sphere.

In contrast to how most discourses usually place agency in an institutionalized role, women's resistance takes place through traditional and non-institutionalised⁸ roles. Women often used their traditional roles as mothers or wives to evoke the peace building movement but are largely left out of the institutional politics of power sharing and decision making process. Organisations and governments alike rarely consider women's roles, sidelining the question of women's security or rights. Women take on a more informal role for mediation and survival through networking, community groups, and more radical roles of entering militant camps (Manchanda 2005).

Active And Passive Agents In The War: A Parallel Between NE And Jammu And Kashmir

In her book, Manchanda (2001) draws upon women's experiences in conflict zones of South Asia, especially Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Jammu and Kashmir. She recognises how women use their traditional roles to assert themselves as both negotiators and perpetrators of conflict in the public sphere. In doing so, women's participation in the peace movement emerges out of a need for not only justice but, 'normalcy' and 'development' which become key to their survival.

⁷ Half widows is a term used to describe women whose husbands may be still missing without a clue of whether they are dead or alive.

⁸ Refers to roles that are not recognised by the institutions of formal politics.

Zia's (2019) book on 'Resisting Disappearance' accounts for the gendered nature of resistance wherein Kashmiri women continually fight against the military's atrocities. In Kashmir, militarisation has led to enforced disappearance of Kashmiri men resulting in the incidence of half widows and grieving mothers and sisters. The Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons was founded in 1994 by supporters and families of those who want to advocate and create awareness about enforced disturbances in Kashmir. The organisation recognises the role women play, under multiple forms of oppression, to negotiate their own survival as well as that of their families. Again, this negotiation takes place in a non-institutionalised context with no political freedom and continuing military occupation (Zia 2019).

In Nagaland, the Naga Mother's Association emerged in 1984 and was one of the most notable women's groups that participated in a ceasefire negotiation. It has played a key role in peace negotiations often through the image of 'motherhood' at the core of Naga politics. In Nagaland, women are excluded from electoral politics. The decision to hold urban local body polls with 33% reservation for women in 2017 was met with a huge resistance from people who said it went against customary laws of the tribe. Likewise, the *Matri Manch* came into existence in 1991 in Guwahati. They were a group of women who led protest marches against women's abuse. Initially *Matri Manch* began around the idea of mothers who lost their sons and gradually evolved to address issues of gender-based violence in general. Bodo women played an active role in the Bodoland movement⁹, which was a struggle for an autonomous state for the Bodo people. They eventually went on to form the All-Bodo Women Welfare Federation in 1993 to fight against gender inequality in their community. They also played a crucial role in peace negotiations, similar to Meira Phibis in Manipur and Naga women in Nagaland (Banerjee 2014).

These women developed instrumental ways of addressing violence and rehabilitation through their traditional roles as mothers, wives, daughters, etc., in their participation against the military's chauvinism. The ideas of motherhood are repeatedly evoked to challenge the machismo of war. As masculinist discourse during a conflict feeds on women's marginalisation and reduces them to passive objects, women's resistance through their traditional roles emerge as an important space for action. As Gender is defined within the boundaries of militarisation in these regions the ideas of masculinity and femininity assume different meanings regarding how bodies are used in the war. While men take on an active role in an armed conflict, women are often left behind to cater to the family. It establishes the idea of active and passive agents of war where women suffer through rape and torture, consolidating their status as victims.

This divide between 'victim' and 'agent' draws upon bodily resistance without considering these women's ethnic and familial realities. Women constantly struggle to create a space for themselves amid patriarchal structures and a lack of resources. While most women's movements and organisations arose in response to ethnic conflicts and violence, many resisted this "masculinisation of space" (Banerjee 2014: 64) in both the private and public spheres. By doing so,

⁹ The Bodoland Movement started under the leadership of All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) who demanded the formation of a separate state for the Bodos called Bodoland.

they accounted for how they use their traditional roles to bargain between the personal and the political.

WELFARE STATE AND A NEO-DEVELOPMENTAL POLICY

In 'Kakching Gardens: Experiments in Normalcy in Manipur', McDuie-Ra (2018) brings a different narrative at work, one often left out by journalists or writers. Kakching is in the Imphal valley of Manipur and provides a unique understanding of militarised landscapes. McDuie-Ra undertakes a spatial ethnography¹⁰ to capture an alternative reality of gender and conflict through militarised landscape and the construction of different agencies therein. He notices how Kakching gardens create a space for the people around to indulge in daily rituals or activities, incorporating some sense of normalcy within the otherwise militarised region. For men and women alike, Kakching gardens have become a recreational space. Such urban spaces provide an alternative to the conflict landscapes. It also asserts the importance of similar developmental projects, which are crucial for the population, to indulge in small acts of normalcy. These narratives often get blurred or go unacknowledged, given these regions are only described as 'disturbed' in most literature (McDuie-Ra 2018).

While a gendered lens is essential, it is not the only reality. There are different motivations and goals for different categories of women who participate in war and reconstruction. There are significant differences between a mother who lost her son and a widow who lost her husband. Furthermore, ethnic differences account for contradictory positions between different groups of women whose identities are defined and redefined in terms of their community. The younger generation, not having felt the implications of war, takes a more developmental approach to nation-building, wherein ideas of progress and economic autonomy replace sovereignty.

As the peace movement takes on a more secondary role, nation-building assumes a more developmental attitude. The building process brings in the demand for more gender-specific measures, especially in the areas of livelihood opportunities and electoral participation. This again offers a complex picture where a section of women with more radical ideas of peace and justice usually drifts away from another category that seeks programs in healthcare and education. A drift further redefines their dealings with the state and non-state actors and their position in the rehabilitation process.

A crucial measure which empowers some women is the livelihood programme offered by the government. Such neo-developmental policies work for both parties as they provide financial autonomy to women while allowing the government to suppress the more radical and militarised voices (Samaddar and Begum 2014).

¹⁰ A form of ethnography that examines how public spaces are constructed, modified, and reproduced by different groups through their use of these particular spaces.

India Rubber Project, aided by the World Bank, opened employment opportunities for the women in Tripura (Banerjee 2014: 61). It created women's self-help groups and induced rural participatory appraisal techniques for their economic mobilisation. The North-East Rural Livelihoods Project [NERLP] is involved in helping self-help groups in the states of Sikkim, Nagaland, Mizoram, and Tripura. It has created a new pool of young working women actively engaged at the local level of development. This phenomenon has further induced more economic opportunities in the region, often allowing young men to start their enterprises instead of being pushed into armed insurgency.

The welfare and developmental policies of the state have again created different gendered categories and allegiances. Whereas some see this as a tokenistic tactic on the part of the state to make them conform to the latter's ideas of peace and justice, others have negotiated their role and, in the process, bargain for policy measures that protect their interests.

CONCLUSION

As public spaces become masculinised, women are left to deal with their everyday reality as mothers, widows, and wives. Poverty, unemployment, and the lack of socio-cultural resources, push women to take on a more authoritative role to support their families. Often forced into sex work, the trafficking of women and children takes place indiscriminately (Samaddar and Begum 2014: 75). Thus, by choice or coercion, women confront different realities in their daily lives where survival precedes peace or justice. Women often do not challenge the state's welfare policies as the policies provide them an only escape from vulnerability.

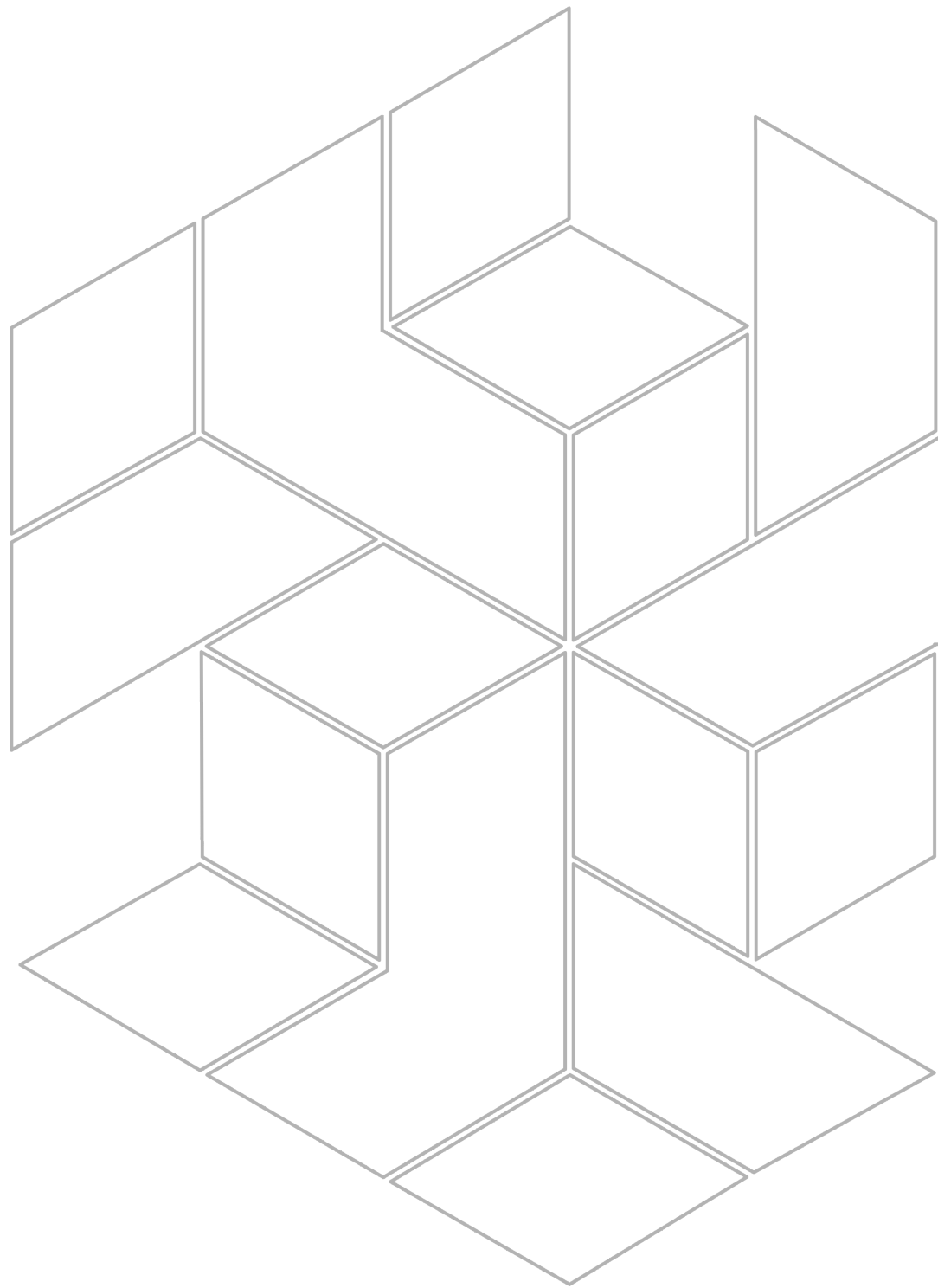
As shelter providers, caretakers, collaborators, negotiators, and combatants, these women play multiple roles daily. Their identities are ever-evolving depending on the particular roles they play at a particular time. These roles are intersecting and redefine their relations with the state, the military, and the family. Therefore, women's agentic capacity is also ever-evolving and should not be viewed solely in the public sphere. They have both transcended and clung onto their traditional roles to navigate the private and the public realities of conflict. One must consider women's agency in the North-East at the intersection of the political and the personal.

Women not only define ideas of peace and nation-building but are also influenced by them. Their nuanced and dynamic role transcends the public-private dichotomy and, as such, needs a re-envisaging of how agency and empowerment is defined for them. It requires seeing them as an important stakeholder in the peace building process.

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