

## Grassroots Security: The Meira Paibi Movement and the Intersection of Gender, Ethnicity, and Conflict in Manipur

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**Abstract:** This article explores the Meira Paibi movement in Manipur, India, as a vital site of grassroots women’s activism operating within a militarized and ethnically contested landscape. Drawing on feminist security studies, intersectionality, and securitization theory, it examines how Meitei women redefine security through everyday acts of resistance, moral regulation, and community care. Originating in the late 1970s, the Meira Paibi or “women torchbearers” have evolved into informal agents of justice, patrolling streets, confronting state violence, and upholding social norms. Using a documentary-based methodology, this study analyzes how the Meira Paibi challenge dominant security discourses and engage in counter-securitizing acts, exemplified by the 2004 naked protest custodial violence. Their activism blurs boundaries between public and private, and resistance and regulation, exposing the embodied and relational dimensions of grassroots security. Yet the movement is not without contradictions: while confronting militarized patriarchy and challenging the state, their exercise of moral authority often reinforces maternalistic authority, moral conservatism, and community-level biopolitical regulation. By situating Meira Paibi within critical feminist and security frameworks, the article contributes to broader debates on gendered resistance, informal governance, and localized peacebuilding, arguing that women’s agency in conflict zones must be understood through a nuanced lens that embraces both their emancipatory potential and their internal tensions.

**Keywords:** Feminist security studies, intersectionality, grassroots resistance, women’s activism

This article contributes to feminist security studies, peace and conflict research, and South Asian gender politics by foregrounding the Meira Paibi movement as a critical case of subaltern women’s activism in a militarized and politically marginalized region. Manipur’s distinct geopolitical position, coupled with the persistent underrepresentation of Northeast India in academic and policy debates, makes the study of this movement both timely and necessary. By examining how Meitei women engage in grassroots securitization and informal governance,

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the article offers a situated regional perspective that speaks to global discussions on gendered resistance, non-state security practices, and intersectional activism. It demonstrates how protection, legitimacy, and political authority are negotiated from below by women who operate simultaneously as protestors, regulators, and community guardians. In doing so, the article contributes to broader feminist debates on the possibilities and contradictions of maternalist activism in postcolonial conflict zones.

Located in India's conflict-affected Northeast, Manipur has long experienced intertwined crises of ethnic polarization, insurgency, and militarization rooted in colonial legacies and postcolonial governance failures (National Council of Educational Research and Training [NCERT], 2018). In this volatile context, state-centered and militarized conceptions of security are insufficient for understanding how safety, justice, and social order are experienced at the community level, particularly by women. Against this backdrop, the Meira Paibi movement has emerged as one of the most sustained and visible forms of grassroots women's activism in the region. Made up primarily of Meitei women, the Meira Paibi have since the 1970s patrolled neighborhoods, challenged human rights violations, and exercised moral authority through their collective presence (Chakravarti, 2010). Recent scholarship has deepened understanding of women's agency in Manipur by examining embodied protest, political subjectivity, and counterpublic resistance (Basnet, 2019; Bora, 2010; Riddle, 2022). Yet limited work has analyzed how the Meira Paibi negotiate changing social expectations or adapt their practices amid evolving political conditions, generational transitions, and shifting forms of insecurity (Arambam, 2021; Sahu & Chauhan, 2024).

This article investigates how the Meira Paibi reframe conventional ideas of security through feminist agency, community care, and informal governance. It argues that the movement operates as a grassroots securitizing force that simultaneously contests the Indian state's militarized governance and draws on culturally embedded notions of maternal responsibility and ethnic solidarity. Meira Paibi's activism is therefore deeply dualistic, both resistant and regulatory, emancipatory yet circumscribed by social norms. Understanding this complexity requires a framework capable of capturing both their counter-hegemonic actions and their participation in moral governance. Accordingly, the article asks: How do the Meira Paibi redefine security through everyday resistance, moral regulation, and community care, and what contradictions emerge through their engagement with gender, ethnicity, and militarization?

This study also speaks directly to contemporary policy and practice debates. Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), counter-insurgency doctrine, and civil-military relations shape everyday security in Manipur, and the Meira Paibi's practices intersect with the mandates and tactics of state and security institutions. Understanding the movement's informal governance, accountability tactics, and community protection strategies therefore matters for policymakers, human-rights practitioners, and civil-society actors working on demilitarization, transitional justice, and community resilience. By documenting how non-state women's groups contest militarized narratives and provide alternative protection, the paper offers lessons for interventions aimed at reducing state violence, designing community-engaged peacebuilding, and improving civilian-military accountability mechanisms.

To address this question, the article draws on three complementary bodies of theory. Feminist security studies call for shifting attention from state-centric, militarized models of security to the lived experiences of those most affected by violence, especially women in conflict settings (Enloe, 2000; Wessalowski et al., 2025). Intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991) provides tools to examine how gender, ethnicity, and militarism converge to shape the possibilities and limitations of Meira Paibi activism. Securitization theory, particularly from the Copenhagen School (Buzan et al., 1998), helps explain how grassroots actors challenge dominant security narratives and perform "counter-securitization" through everyday practices.

Despite their prominence in public discourse, the evolving role of the Meira Paibi in Manipur's securitized landscape remains underexamined. Existing studies have illuminated women's resistance and counterpublic activism, but few have explored how the movement adapts its strategies in response to new forms of state violence, interethnic tensions, or changing community expectations (Arambam, 2021; Kakoti, 2021). Ongoing enforcement of the AFSPA continues to shape daily life and foregrounds urgent questions surrounding community protection, gendered authority, and state power (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2022, Wani, 2022). This study therefore examines how the Meira Paibi articulate and enact alternative forms of security, and what these practices reveal about the politics of protection in a militarized environment.

By centering the Meira Paibi, the article contributes to broader debates on informal governance, feminist peacebuilding, and gendered redefinitions of security in conflict-affected regions. Ultimately, it argues that understanding peace and justice in places like Manipur requires attending to the everyday practices, symbolic acts, and relational forms of care through which women reimagine security from below.

## Contextual Background

Manipur, a small state in India's Northeast, lies at the intersection of geopolitical marginalization, complex ethnic demography, and a long history of militarization. Formerly an independent kingdom, it was incorporated into the Indian Union in 1949 under contested circumstances, laying the foundation for enduring political grievances. Since then, Manipur has experienced recurrent insurgencies, demands for autonomy, and deep-seated conflicts rooted in ethnic identity and state repression. These dynamics have entrenched a highly securitized mode of governance, most visibly embodied in the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA).

The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA), extended to Manipur in 1980, remains one of the most controversial instruments of militarized state authority. The Act grants the armed forces sweeping powers to conduct warrantless searches, make arbitrary arrests, and employ lethal force with broad discretionary authority (Silitonga, 2021). It also institutionalizes legal impunity, enabling forms of exceptional violence, particularly gendered violence, that disproportionately harm women in conflict-affected regions (Wani, 2022). The law's implementation has produced a climate of fear, normalized extraordinary state powers, and reshaped everyday life across the state (Chakravarti, 2010; Sudhir, 2002).

While militarization affects all communities in Manipur, women bear distinct emotional, social, and economic burdens. Confronted with militarized households, constant surveillance, and the threat of violence, women have expanded their roles from domestic caretakers to frontline actors of community protection and political resistance. It is within this landscape of pervasive insecurity that the Meira Paibi movement emerged, challenging both state violence and the patriarchal constraints that historically circumscribed women's public agency.

The state's framing of women's activism further illustrates the contradictory nature of security in Manipur. Government reports, such as those from the Ministry of Home Affairs (2022), depict women-led interventions during cordon-and-search operations as disruptions to "law and order," effectively recasting community protection as political obstruction. Human rights organizations provide a counter-narrative, documenting intimidation and surveillance targeting Meira Paibi patrols, especially when they attempt to prevent arbitrary detentions (Manipur Women Gun Survivors Network, 2023). These divergent portrayals underscore a persistent tension: while Meira Paibi mobilizations are rooted in care, protection, and community responsibility, the state frequently interprets the same actions through a lens of suspicion. As a result, women's grassroots efforts occupy an ambiguous space: they are socially

legitimate at the community level yet often perceived as threats within counterinsurgency frameworks.

Manipur's ethnic composition adds another layer to this complex security landscape. The state is home to three major groups: the Meitei (approximately 53%), Nagas (24%), and Kuki-Chin communities (16%). Under India's constitutional categories, the Naga and Kuki-Chin groups are recognized as Scheduled Tribes, granting them land rights and access to affirmative action in education, political representation, and government employment. The Meitei, however, do not share this status (International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs [IWGIA], 2023). These distinctions are reinforced geographically: Meiteis primarily inhabit the central valley, while tribal communities reside in the surrounding hill districts. The resulting political and spatial divisions often fuel disputes over land ownership, cultural autonomy, and governance.

It is within this fractured, militarized, and ethnically charged environment that the Meira Paibi operates. Their activism is shaped not only by opposition to state violence but also by obligations to ethnic identity and community cohesion. As a result, the movement occupies a critical yet complex position at the intersection of gendered care, civic responsibility, and the broader politics of security in Manipur.

### **The Meira Paibi: Origins and Maternal Identity**

The Meira Paibi, literally “torchbearers”, is a grassroots women's collective formally established in 1977 in Kakching, Manipur. Composed primarily of Meitei women, the movement takes its name from the flaming torches (meira) carried during nighttime patrols and protests. These early patrols focused on addressing social concerns such as alcohol and drug abuse, reflecting a form of community vigilance grounded in moral guardianship. Over time, these activities expanded into a broader socio-political movement that confronts state and insurgent violence, enforces community discipline, and mediates informal justice processes (Silitonga, 2021).

The Meira Paibi are widely described as the “third Nupi Lan” (Women's War), situating the movement within a long-standing tradition of Manipuri women's collective action against injustice. The first Nupi Lan of 1904 protested British-imposed forced labor, while the second in 1939 mobilized against exploitative rice export policies (Parratt & Parratt, 2001). This historical lineage underscores a unique cultural “permission structure” for women's public engagement in Manipur. Notably, the existence of a 17th-century women's court and the enduring Khwairamband Keithel or Imphal's central all-women market have long positioned Manipuri women as visible public actors. This spatial and social centrality has provided both symbolic authority and practical opportunities for collective mobilization, allowing women to intervene during curfews, military raids, and public unrest to protect youth and mediate community tensions (Sudhir, 2002). This historical backdrop is not merely contextual; it is integral to understanding why the Meira Paibi command widespread legitimacy.

Central to their influence is the movement's maternal identity. As Imas (mothers), the Meira Paibi wield a powerful moral authority that affords them a degree of social immunity and courage often unavailable to men (Agarwala, 2023). Revered as “Brave Mothers,” they embody a culturally resonant maternal ethos that frames their activism as an extension of care-based responsibility (Nepam, as cited in Silitonga, 2021). This identity initially motivated interventions in issues such as alcoholism and domestic conflict, but it also enabled women to confront human rights violations and intimidation by state security forces (Yumnam, 2023). Maternal legitimacy thus underpins both their everyday community work and their more contentious political engagements, particularly under the militarized conditions created by the AFSPA.

The movement's maternal authority has also made the Meira Paibi prominent in times of acute conflict. During recent ethnic violence, they have engaged in community defense, humanitarian support, and public protest (Agarwala, 2023; FLAME University, 2023). However, their visibility has also generated political controversy, as different groups interpret their interventions through competing ethnic and ideological perspectives. Broader global evidence indicates that ethnic and religious tensions are strong predictors of internal conflict, especially where governance structures are fragile (Parsons & Naghshpour, 2024). This pattern resonates with Manipur, where weak state institutions and deepening ethnic polarization shape the volatile environment in which the Meira Paibi operate.

Over more than four decades, the Meira Paibi have undergone significant transformation in response to Manipur's shifting socio-political landscape. Their early activism in the late 1970s emphasized neighborhood surveillance and the regulation of alcohol use, gambling, and domestic disputes, practices grounded in culturally defined notions of maternal responsibility. As militarization intensified in the 1980s and 1990s, these practices evolved into direct political action: organizing blockades, intervening in security operations, and protesting arbitrary detentions (Basnet, 2019; Chakravarti, 2010).

A further shift has emerged in the 2010s and 2020s as younger women adopt digital advocacy, challenge aspects of moral surveillance, and renegotiate the movement's identity amid renewed ethnic conflicts (Yumnam, 2023). Together, these phases illustrate a dynamic trajectory in which the Meira Paibi move from local moral guardianship toward a more multifaceted political agency, continually adapting to changing forms of insecurity and evolving generational expectations.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study employs three interlocking frameworks, feminist security studies, intersectionality, and securitization theory, to analyze the complex practices of the Meira Paibi movement. Together, these perspectives help illuminate how grassroots women's activism operates within, and in resistance to, Manipur's militarized environment, ethnic hierarchies, and gendered social norms. Each framework contributes a distinct analytical lens while collectively offering a multidimensional understanding of the movement's political significance.

Feminist security studies challenge dominant security paradigms that prioritize territorial sovereignty and military power over the lived realities of individuals and communities. Scholars such as Enloe (2000) and Shepherd (2008) argue that state-centric approaches obscure the everyday, gendered impacts of conflict and marginalize women's experiences of violence and survival. Through this lens, the Meira Paibi exemplifies an alternative, care-based approach to security rooted in embodied practices and collective responsibility. Their nighttime patrols, street demonstrations, and interventions in domestic and community disputes represent a feminized mode of protection that subverts the masculinized logic of militarized authority. As Chakravarti (2010) observes, performative protests such as the 2004 disrobing at Kangla Fort highlight how the Meira Paibi confront patriarchal and state violence not through force but through symbolic embodiment, moral outrage, and maternal legitimacy. Feminist security studies thus situate their actions as part of a broader effort to redefine security from below.

Intersectionality, articulated by Crenshaw (1989, 1991), further deepens this analysis by examining how overlapping structures of gender, ethnicity, class, and militarization shape the constraints and possibilities of women's political agency. In Manipur, Meitei women occupy a complex positionality: they hold cultural authority and respectability within their own community yet remain marginalized within patriarchal and hyper-militarized state structures.

Their ethnic majority status also situates them differently in relation to Naga and Kuki communities, enabling certain forms of activism while complicating cross-ethnic solidarities. As Riddle (2022) demonstrates, even highly visible actors like the Meira Paibi can be excluded from formal peacebuilding spaces due to intersecting hierarchies. Intersectionality therefore helps reveal how legitimacy and political influence are unevenly distributed, even within movements celebrated for their collective strength. It also allows the study to consider how maternal authority, ethnic identity, and normative femininity simultaneously empower and limit the Meira Paibi's activism.

Securitization theory, particularly the model developed by the Copenhagen School (Buzan et al., 1998), provides a third analytical lens. Classical securitization theory emphasizes how political elites construct issues as existential threats requiring exceptional measures. This study extends the concept to explore how marginalized actors engage in counter-securitization, that is, how they contest dominant threat narratives and articulate alternative understandings of danger and protection. The Meira Paibi accomplishes this through both discourse and embodied practice. Their dramatic 2004 protest, for example, reframed the Indian military, rather than insurgent groups, as the primary threat to community safety, thereby challenging the state's monopoly over defining security concerns. Such acts demonstrate that women's collective agency can shift the terms of security politics by asserting new actors, new threats, and new forms of legitimacy. Incorporating Meira Paibi activism into securitization theory expands the framework to include subaltern voices and symbolic politics.

Together, these three frameworks provide a robust foundation for analyzing the tensions, contradictions, and transformative possibilities within the Meira Paibi movement. While their activism challenges militarized governance and reimagines community security, it can also reinforce moral and cultural norms that create new boundaries, particularly for youth, non-Meitei communities, and gender-nonconforming individuals. By situating the Meira Paibi within these intersecting theoretical paradigms, this study highlights the complexity of grassroots resistance in a militarized, ethnically diverse, and culturally layered context.

## Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with women's activism in India's Northeast consistently highlights the dual role women assume as both victims of violence and agents of resistance. Manipur has become a focal point for understanding how gendered forms of political participation shape informal governance and challenge hegemonic power structures. The Meira Paibi movement has garnered sustained academic attention due to its longevity, moral authority, and capacity to reshape dominant conceptions of security and protest.

Chakravarti (2010) foregrounds the embodied dimensions of Meira Paibi resistance, showing how women's collective presence and symbolic interventions unsettle the militarized masculinity that structures both state and insurgent power. The 2004 protest following the custodial killing of Thangjam Manorama exemplifies this dynamic: by mobilizing bodily symbolism, the women transformed vulnerability into a site of political defiance, thereby reshaping public discourse on violence and justice.

More recent studies highlight how women's activism in Manipur is continually reshaped by shifting terrains of insecurity, ethnic fragmentation, and community governance. These analyses demonstrate how women renegotiate their roles amid changing political pressures and renewed forms of violence (Arambam, 2021; Basnet, 2019; Riddle, 2022). Scholarship on intersectionality in the Indian context further clarifies how gendered agency is shaped by overlapping structures of power, producing uneven distributions of legitimacy within and across communities (Sahu & Chauhan, 2024).

At the same time, broader research on youth activism and digital communication in India suggests that online platforms are transforming, but not fundamentally replacing,

traditional modes of protest. Roy (2024), for example, shows that while educated youth increasingly use social media, they do not view it as an effective revolutionary tool; rather, digital engagement tends to support localized, neighborhood-level mobilization. This insight is especially relevant for understanding younger Manipuri women who navigate both traditional Meira Paibi activism and emerging digital repertoires, demonstrating that online engagement may augment, but does not replace, embodied and community-rooted practices.

A parallel body of literature interrogates the ambivalent role of maternal authority in Meira Paibi mobilization. Ray (2018) argues that “political motherhood” simultaneously empowers and constrains women’s activism: while maternal legitimacy strengthens claims to moral authority and community protection, it also risks confining women’s political identities within culturally sanctioned boundaries. Similar concerns surface in work on Meira Paibi leadership, which notes how maternal discourses enable women to address social harms and state violence, yet also reproduce gendered expectations surrounding care, virtue, and communal responsibility (Silitonga, 2021; Yumnam, 2023).

Building on these critiques, Yumnam (2023) conceptualizes the Meira Paibi as informal educators and symbolic performers who engage in ongoing normative negotiation while simultaneously contesting patriarchal structures. Silitonga (2021) situates the movement within peacebuilding theory and emphasizes the strategic use of nonviolent methods, such as rallies, torchlight vigils, and hunger strikes, as forms of community-rooted resistance. Adding further nuance, Salam (2023) introduces the framework of “everyday resistance” to argue that Meira Paibi activism combines highly visible protest with sustained, less visible interventions that challenge state power from below.

Recent scholarships have also reconsidered assumptions about the role of digital technologies in shaping contemporary protest. Roy (2024), drawing on mixed-methods research across Indian states, challenges the common narrative that social media inherently facilitates large-scale political mobilization. His findings indicate that while educated youth frequently use digital platforms, they do not view them as effective tools for revolutionary change; rather, social media tends to support localized, small-scale coordination. This insight is particularly relevant for understanding the emergent generation of younger Manipuri women who navigate both traditional Meira Paibi activism and new digital repertoires, revealing that online engagement may augment, but does not replace, the movement’s embodied and community-rooted practices.

Intersectional analyses further complicate celebratory narratives of women’s leadership. Drawing on Crenshaw, Riddle (2022) illustrates how gender, caste, and ethnicity intersect to produce exclusions even within women-led movements. Her concept of “justpeace” critiques the superficial inclusion of women in peacebuilding processes, highlighting that visibility does not necessarily generate structural transformation. In the context of Manipur, the predominance of Meitei women within the Meira Paibi raises concerns over the marginalization of Kuki, Naga, and other tribal women, complicating claims to collective solidarity.

These tensions have become more pronounced in the wake of the April 2023 conflict between Meitei and Kuki (Kuki-Chin-Zo) communities. Triggered by the Manipur High Court’s recommendation to grant Scheduled Tribe status to Meiteis, a move that intensified long-standing anxieties surrounding land ownership and political marginalization, the violence unfolded amid refugee inflows from Myanmar and allegations of state bias (Monnappa, 2024). In this volatile context, the Meira Paibi’s role has come under renewed scrutiny. Although they continue to engage in community protection and protest, accusations of ethnic partiality have challenged their long-standing image as neutral peacebuilders (Agarwala, 2023).

Historical scholarship underscores that contemporary activism is rooted in a longer lineage of women’s resistance. The Nupi Lan (Women’s Wars) of 1904 and 1939 serve as foundational precedents for the movement, linking earlier anti-colonial mobilizations to the

Meira Paibi's emergence in the 1970s. Initially organized to curb alcoholism and social disorder, the group soon expanded its scope to include mobilization against the AFSPA and militarized abuses through sustained non-violent protest (Laishram, 2019; Parratt & Parratt, 2001; Salam, 2023; Silitonga, 2021; Sudhir, 2002; Yumnam, 2023).

Civil society organizations continue to underscore the pivotal role women play in grassroots peacebuilding, even as formal systems sideline them. A 2023 Manipur Women Gun Survivors Network report notes, "Meira Paibi ... vouch to ensure peace in the strife torn state," underscoring their ongoing vigilance amid ethnic violence (Manipur Women Gun Survivors Network, 2023). Meanwhile, documents produced by the Northeast Network, including its Resource Directory for Women, highlight sustained efforts to mobilize women for conflict response and awareness raising, even as structural exclusions persist (Northeast Network, 2021).

Together, this literature portrays the Meira Paibi not as static icons of maternal virtue but as dynamic political agents navigating the intersections of gender, ethnicity, and militarization. Their activism reflects both historical continuity and contemporary adaptation, demanding critical, interdisciplinary approaches to understand the constraints and possibilities of feminist resistance in militarized societies.

## Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, documentary-based research design grounded in feminist epistemology, which prioritizes lived experience, community knowledge, and embodied forms of agency- particularly those emerging from actors positioned at the margins of state power. In the absence of safe and feasible conditions for primary fieldwork, including interviews with Meira Paibi members or residents, the analysis draws on a diverse corpus of publicly available materials. These include peer-reviewed academic publications; historical and ethnographic accounts tracing women's mobilization in Manipur from the Nupi Lan to the present; government and civil society report from organizations such as the Northeast Network and the Manipur Women Gun Survivors Network; and journalistic reporting from Scroll.in, Deccan Herald, and local Manipuri media. This multi-source strategy provides historical continuity, contextual depth, institutional perspectives, and grassroots narratives, enabling the study to examine both how the Meira Paibi are represented and how they articulate their own practices of care, legitimacy, and resistance across time and narrative genres.

Analytically, the study adopts an interpretive, thematic approach informed by discourse analysis and grounded theory sensibilities. Rather than employing formal coding procedures, documents were examined through iterative, cross-referential reading to identify recurring patterns such as moral authority, embodied protest, maternal symbolism, community governance, and counter-securitization. Cross-source comparison was used to trace points of convergence and divergence among academic analyses, civil society documentation, state records, and local news reportage, thereby enhancing internal validity and preventing any single perspective from dominating the interpretation.

### Reliability and Validity

To strengthen the credibility of documentary analysis, the study applied multiple reliability and validity procedures. First, source triangulation was employed. Findings were cross-checked across four source categories: peer-reviewed scholarship, historical and ethnographic monographs, civil society reports, and local and national journalism. This process enabled the identification of consistent patterns while also flagging discrepancies across sources. Second, provenance and corroboration checks were used to assess source reliability (author credentials, publication venue, and contemporaneity). Third, negative-case attention and reflexive memoing were used during iterative readings to surface contradictory evidence and avoid selective interpretation. Finally, the analytic process was documented as a chain of

evidence (log of documents, reading notes, and thematic memos) so that interpretations can be inspected and, where feasible, replicated by future researchers.

#### Analytic Procedures and Transferability

The interpretive thematic method involved repeated readings and progressive abstraction to generate themes, with regular cross-checking between the two authors to reduce interpretive bias. Although formal interview-based member checking was not feasible for safety reasons, the research explicitly triangulates across institutional, media, and scholarly accounts to validate interpretations. The study aims for analytical generalization: findings are transferable to contexts that share key conditions (persistent militarization, weak institutional accountability, and sharp ethnic cleavages), rather than claiming statistical representativeness. We discuss these boundary conditions in the conclusion and suggest ethnographic follow-up to strengthen causal claims.

Given the conflict-affected context and documentary nature of the data, the aim is not statistical generalization but analytical generalization: the findings illuminate broader dynamics of gendered agency and grassroots security that may resonate in other militarized or heavily policed environments. Ethical considerations remained central throughout the research process, with particular attention to avoiding romanticization and acknowledging the movement's internal contradictions. Although the absence of interviews limits access to individualized perspectives, the triangulated dataset provides a robust, historically grounded, and theoretically informed foundation for interpreting the Meira Paibi's evolving political role. Future research would benefit from ethnographic engagement with younger women whose experiences may reveal shifting conceptions of activism and authority within the movement.

#### **Ethical Statement**

This study uses a qualitative, documentary-based research design with no human participants.

#### **Findings and Analysis**

This section presents the empirical findings of the study, analyzed through feminist security studies, intersectionality theory, and securitization theory. The analysis demonstrates how Meira Paibi activism reshapes everyday security practices, produces both empowering and regulatory effects, and is continually shaped by the intersections of gender, ethnicity, and militarization in Manipur.

#### **Everyday Security Practices and the Redefinition of Protection**

The Meira Paibi emerged during a period of institutional breakdown, responding initially to widespread alcohol abuse and domestic violence through nightly patrols and neighborhood vigilance. These practices quickly expanded into broader forms of community protection that redefined security as a relational, care-based endeavor. Their approach directly challenges the coercive, state-centered model reinforced by the AFSPA and militarized governance.

Drawing on the symbolic authority of motherhood, the Meira Paibi mobilize what feminist scholars describe as a “politics of presence” (Chakravarti, 2010; Enloe, 2000). Their patrols, vigils, and public interventions deter everyday crimes while cultivating a sense of collective responsibility in contexts where state authority is distrusted or absent. This form of “everyday securitization” reframes protection as a community-driven process, anchored in gendered responsibility and cultural legitimacy. Feminist security studies thus help

conceptualize these practices as “security from below,” a grassroots alternative to patriarchal and militarized state approaches.

### **Embodied Protest and Symbolic Disruption**

Embodied protest has long functioned as a central political vocabulary in Meira Paibi activism. To illustrate its significance, this section examines two incidents involving public disrobing: one enacted as deliberate feminist resistance and the other as a coercive expression of ethnic violence. Read together, these cases reveal how women’s bodies operate as contested sites of meaning, vulnerability, and political authority within Manipur’s securitized landscape.

The first incident, the 2004 naked protest by twelve Meitei women outside the Assam Rifles headquarters, exemplifies the strategic deployment of embodied disruption. By disrobing and publicly accusing the military of sexual violence, the protestors mobilized culturally grounded maternal authority to challenge militarized masculinity and to expose the state, rather than insurgent groups, as a central producer of insecurity. As Chakravarti (2010) observes, this intervention transformed the female body from an object of vulnerability into a medium of political rupture, unsettling official threat narratives and demanding accountability for custodial violence.

From a securitization perspective, the 2004 protest constituted a powerful act of counter-securitization. It directly contested the state’s claim to legitimacy as a protector by revealing the military as a source of everyday fear and harm. The protest’s use of nudity, silence, and affect created a visceral political spectacle that disrupted the male-dominated terrain of security politics. Chakravarti (2010) interprets this act as a culturally rooted performance of maternal moral authority that reclaimed public space through embodied resistance, re-signifying the female body as an instrument of indigenous justice rather than passive victimhood.

The second incident, which circulated widely during the 2023 ethnic clashes, involved two Kuki women being forcibly stripped and paraded naked by a mob. Although not linked to Meira Paibi activism, this episode starkly illuminates the persistent gendered precarity that structures everyday life in Manipur. Whereas the 2004 protest represented an intentional and agentive act of resistance, the 2023 assault reflects the coercive instrumentalization of women’s bodies amid communal polarization and the breakdown of state authority. In this instance, women’s bodies became vehicles for collective humiliation and ethnic domination rather than sites of political intervention.

The circulation of a video documenting the assault, which surfaced publicly on July 19, 2023, provoked widespread national and international outrage and prompted judicial intervention at the highest level. As reported by Al Jazeera (2023), the Supreme Court of India condemned the violence and announced that it would closely monitor investigations into cases of sexual assault linked to the Manipur conflict, emphasizing that such acts constitute grave violations of constitutional protections. While the incident did not involve organized action by the Meira Paibi, it nevertheless underscores the gendered insecurity that the movement has long sought to confront.

Taken together, these incidents highlight the divergent yet interconnected ways women’s bodies are politicized in contexts of militarization and ethnic conflict. They reveal how embodied protests can function as a powerful challenge to state violence, while also exposing how the same bodies remain vulnerable to coercive violence during periods of political rupture. In doing so, these cases reaffirm the continuing relevance of grassroots women’s initiatives such as the Meira Paibi, which articulate alternative, community-based understandings of security and justice in environments where formal institutions repeatedly fail to protect those most at risk.

## **Community Governance and Moral Regulation**

Beyond protest, the Meira Paibi play a significant role in informal governance by mediating disputes, coordinating community responses, and enforcing social norms. Their mediation practices, particularly in cases of domestic conflict, emphasize dialogue and restoration while often reinforcing dominant ideals of womanhood and sexual propriety (Salam, 2023). They also impose curfews, intervene in public disturbances, and organize collective shaming when behavior threatens community stability.

While these interventions enhance neighborhood safety, they also raise concerns about moral policing. Critics argue that restrictions on alcohol use, dress, sexuality, and youth mobility risk reinforcing patriarchal norms and curtailing individual freedoms (Agarwala, 2023; Sudhir, 2002). Foucault's concept of biopower helps explain how their practices constitute community-level mechanisms of discipline that regulate bodies and behaviors. Their activism is thus simultaneously emancipatory, insofar as it challenges state violence, and regulatory, as it reproduces aspects of conservative gender regimes. This duality illustrates the ambivalent nature of grassroots authority and highlights the importance of an intersectional analysis in understanding its impacts.

## **Anti-AFSPA Activism and Counter-Narratives of Threat**

A defining feature of Meira Paibi activism is its sustained and organized resistance to the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA), a legal framework that has long structured militarized governance in Manipur. Through torchlight marches, sit-ins, night patrols, and community assemblies, Meira Paibi groups have mobilized for decades against what they perceive as the normalization of exceptional security measures and the disproportionate burdens these impose on local communities. Their actions articulate a persistent critique of the militarized state, identifying the Indian security apparatus, rather than insurgent organizations, as the primary generator of fear, insecurity, and everyday disruption. This inversion of official threat narratives positions Meira Paibi not as passive victims of conflict but as self-authorized security actors capable of safeguarding communal life.

Such counter-framings resonate with securitization theory, insofar as the Meira Paibi engage in a grassroots reframing of danger that contests the state's exclusive authority to define emergencies. Their embodied practices, including public vigils, collective blockades, and symbolic neighborhood guardianship, perform a form of community-level counter-securitization by asserting that the locus of threat often resides within state institutions themselves. At the same time, their sustained critique of the AFSPA can be read as an effort toward "de-securitization," seeking to return everyday governance to civilian norms and remove routine life from the ambit of emergency legislation. This dual movement reflects core principles of feminist peace theory, which emphasizes relational security, structural transformation, and justice-based definitions of peace.

The confrontational relationship between Meira Paibi and state security forces has been reinforced by official representations of their mobilization. Government and military briefings frequently categorize women's blockades, vigils, and patrols as obstructions to counterinsurgency operations or impediments to maintaining "law and order." These depictions illustrate an institutional tendency to securitize women's protests, casting them as potential threats rather than community-based mechanisms of protection. Within this discursive landscape, Meira Paibi's public challenges to the AFSPA, their insistence on accountability for custodial violence, and their denunciation of impunity constitute a deliberate reorientation of security discourse. By shifting attention to the coercive capacities of the military, they expose

asymmetries embedded in militarized governance and assert the legitimacy of civilian agency in defining conditions of safety.

State responses have combined legal, administrative, and discursive strategies. Public affirmations of the AFSPA, periodic security advisories, selective consultations with local leaders, and surveillance of women's patrols all demonstrate a complex attempt to manage, co-opt, or contain the movement. Expanded engagement with official documents, such as press releases, court rulings, and Ministry of Home Affairs statements, could further illuminate how state practices have shaped the tactical evolution of the Meira Paibi and influenced public perceptions of their legitimacy.

### **Ethnic Identity, Solidarity, and Exclusion**

The Meira Paibi have long been celebrated for their non-violent intervention and community-based resistance; however, their role in inter-ethnic relations remains deeply contested. Their activism unfolds within a socially stratified and ethnically polarized environment, where identity-based tensions shape both the possibilities and limitations of collective action. As a predominantly Meitei women's movement, the Meira Paibi's maternal authority, while deeply resonant and morally compelling within Meitei society, does not consistently translate into inclusive peacebuilding across Manipur's ethnically diverse communities.

Existing scholarship emphasizes that Meira Paibi activism often reflects the priorities and cultural worldviews of Meitei Hindu women. Bezbaruah (2018) notes that during moments of inter-ethnic conflict, boundaries of solidarity become sharply delineated, and allegiances tend to consolidate around ethnic lines. This dynamic complicates simplified portrayals of the movement as uniformly representative of all women in Manipur. Instead, it underscores how activism is always embedded within layered hierarchies of identity, privilege, and belonging.

The intersection of gender, ethnicity, and conflict plays a significant role in shaping Meira Paibi's contested legitimacy. Drawing on structural intersectionality, Riddle (2022) demonstrates that women's resistance in Manipur is mediated not only by patriarchy but also by ethnic, religious, and political marginalization. While their identity as "mothers" enables them to challenge state violence, their positionality as Meitei women may engender perceptions of partiality, especially in contexts of heightened communal tension. Salam (2023) similarly interprets Meira Paibi activism as a form of ontological security for the Meitei community, functioning as a mechanism for affirming ethnic identity in the face of perceived external threats.

These tensions became particularly pronounced during the 2023 Meitei–Kuki conflict when the movement was simultaneously invoked as a stabilizing force and criticized for perceived ethnic bias. Reports of Meira Paibi members protecting vulnerable civilians coexisted with allegations of facilitating or encouraging confrontational actions against Kuki communities. Such divergent narratives illustrate how efforts to secure one community's identity and safety can inadvertently exacerbate inter-ethnic grievances and destabilize broader peacebuilding efforts in a multi-ethnic setting.

Riddle's (2022) critique of "justpeace" is especially relevant here. She argues that without attending to intersecting axes of ethnicity, class, and gender, even women-led initiatives risk reproducing dominant group perspectives and marginalizing less visible voices. Her analysis underscores the need for inclusive frameworks that move beyond symbolic maternal authority toward transformative and cross-community justice.

Taken together, the analysis reveals three broader patterns that illuminate the evolving role of the Meira Paibi in Manipur's conflict landscape. First, their everyday practices, ranging from nightly patrols to the mediation of community disputes, function as alternative infrastructures of security in contexts where state institutions are distrusted or experienced as

sources of harm. Second, their embodied protests and sustained public presence disrupt militarized constructions of threat and demonstrate how gendered moral authority can redefine local understandings of legitimacy and protection. Third, their internal dynamics, shaped by ethnicity, generational shifts, and changing moral expectations, highlight that women's agency is simultaneously enabled and constrained by the hierarchies in which it is embedded. These interconnected dynamics provide a foundation for understanding how the Meira Paibi articulate "security from below" and contribute to broader debates on gender, violence, and political authority in ethnically divided and militarized societies.

### **Intergenerational Tensions and Shifting Modes of Activism**

Intergenerational change is increasingly reshaping both the identity and strategic orientation of the Meira Paibi movement. Younger Meitei women often express ambivalence toward the moral surveillance that characterizes some traditional Meira Paibi practices, particularly those involving the regulation of youth behavior and the enforcement of community norms. Whereas senior members frame such interventions as extensions of maternal responsibility, younger women tend to view certain regulatory actions as misaligned with contemporary values of personal autonomy, gender equality, and expressive freedom. These tensions illuminate the ways in which gender, age, and shifting social values intersect to shape perceptions of legitimacy within the movement.

At the same time, younger activists are not disengaging from collective action; rather, they are developing hybrid forms of activism that blend established protest traditions with digital communication, feminist critique, and intersectional solidarities. This evolution reflects a broader transition observed in feminist praxis across South Asia, moving from maternalist and community-centered modes of engagement toward more pluralistic, rights-based, and network-oriented forms of activism. While the embodied and neighborhood-based strategies long associated with the Meira Paibi remain central to community protection, the movement's future will depend on how effectively it adapts to rapidly changing political, technological, and cultural landscapes.

The study's findings regarding generational dynamics also resonate with broader national patterns in youth political engagement. Roy (2024) observes that even among highly educated Indian youth, social media is not widely perceived as a "technology of revolution" capable of generating large-scale political transformation. Instead, online platforms tend to facilitate localized coordination, peer-to-peer communication, and community-level support. This insight parallels the experiences of younger Meitei women, who increasingly use social media to document abuses, circulate information during crises, and raise awareness about women's safety, yet continue to rely on in-person vigilance, neighborhood networks, and collective visibility as the core mechanisms of political action.

Integrating Roy's findings strengthens the argument that digital engagement among younger women supplements, rather than replaces, embodied forms of grassroots resistance. In militarized environments such as Manipur, where trust, proximity, and community presence remain essential, the incorporation of digital tools does not fundamentally alter the movement's structural logic but instead enhances its capacity for communication and coordination. This underscores the importance of viewing generational change not as a rupture but as an ongoing process through which Meira Paibi activism expands its repertoire while remaining grounded in its historically rooted practices of care, vigilance, and collective protection.

Taken together, these dynamics portray the Meira Paibi as multi-sited actors who function as protectors, regulators, protestors, and political subjects, with roles that shift in response to context, crisis, and generational transformation. Their activism cannot be reduced

to a single category; rather, it constitutes a dynamic negotiation of care, control, resistance, and tradition embedded within the intersecting forces of gender, ethnicity, and militarization.

### **Intersectional Dynamics: Gender, Ethnicity, and Conflict in Meira Paibi Activism**

The Meira Paibi movement offers a striking example of how gender, ethnicity, and conflict intersect to shape women's activism and public authority in militarized settings. Rather than embodying passive victimhood, Meitei women draw from a long lineage of public engagement, including the Nupi Lan (Women's Wars) and the economic centrality of Khwairamband Keithel (Salam, 2023), to assert moral and political agency in moments of crisis. This historical grounding provides a culturally recognized basis for their contemporary interventions and helps explain why the movement continues to command public legitimacy.

The trajectory of the Meira Paibi can be understood in at least three phases: (1) community guardianship (late 1970s–1980s), characterized by local moral regulation and neighborhood patrols addressing social concerns; (2) political mobilization (late 1980s–2000s), marked by direct confrontation with armed forces and high-profile embodied protests, most notably the 2004 Kangla Fort demonstration; and (3) negotiation and renewal (2010s–present), involving digital advocacy, generational debates over moral surveillance, and contested roles during the 2023 ethnic violence. Explicitly anchoring the analysis to these phases clarifies the causal links between shifting political conditions and evolving activist strategies.

Central to Meira Paibi activism is a gendered enactment of motherhood that functions simultaneously as a moral resource and a political strategy. As noted by Yumnam (2023) and Bezbaruah (2018), the identity of Ima, a Meitei term for “mother” imbued with social legitimacy and moral authority, enables women to extend maternal responsibility beyond the domestic sphere into public claims for justice, dignity, and community protection. The 2004 naked protest exemplifies this dynamic. By transforming their bodies into instruments of political rupture, the Meira Paibi challenged militarized masculinity, expanded dominant definitions of protest, and articulated a collective Meitei identity perceived to be under threat. This illustrates how intersectionality operates not only as a site of oppression but also as a site of resistance, allowing women to convert culturally valued roles into political leverage.

Through the lens of feminist security studies, the Meira Paibi enact a form of “security from below,” shifting the meaning of protection from institutional coercion to community-based care, vigilance, and moral authority. Their patrols, dispute mediation, and public protests constitute counter-securitizing practices that expose the military, not insurgents, as the primary source of insecurity in everyday life. However, these same practices reveal contradictions: while challenging state violence, the Meira Paibi also regulate sexuality, youth behavior, and social norms in ways that align with conservative values. Foucault's concept of biopower helps illuminate how their community governance simultaneously resists external domination and reproduces internal systems of discipline.

Comparative scholarship further contextualizes these dynamics. Studies of Iranian Kurds (Heydari & Ghasemi, 2025), ethnic minorities in Kazakhstan (Assyltayeva et al., 2024), and other marginalized groups show how militarization, ethnicity, and gender interact to produce layered forms of exclusion. Similar patterns are visible in Manipur: Meitei women navigate overlapping vulnerabilities as residents of a militarized region, as members of an ethnically dominant yet politically contested community, and as caregivers responsible for sustaining social cohesion.

These insights support broader feminist and critical security arguments that security is produced through everyday practices, affective relations, and community mobilization rather than solely through formal institutions (Enloe, 2000; Shepherd, 2008). At the same time, an intersectional perspective highlights the boundaries of Meira Paibi's legitimacy. Their maternal authority is powerful within Meitei society but does not necessarily translate across ethnic

divides. As recent Meitei–Kuki tensions demonstrate, their activism can be read as stabilizing by some and partisan by others, revealing the limits of maternal legitimacy in divided societies.

Collectively, these findings show that Meira Paibi activism cannot be characterized as uniformly emancipatory. Instead, it reflects a dynamic interplay of resistance and regulation, inclusion and exclusion, transformation and continuity. Their practices challenge state violence while simultaneously reinforcing certain social hierarchies, demonstrating that women’s activism in conflict zones is always shaped by broader structures of gender, ethnicity, and power.

## Conclusion

The Meira Paibi movement represents a complex and evolving model of grassroots resistance in a context marked by militarization, ethnic fragmentation, and gendered social hierarchies. Rooted in Meitei cultural history yet responding to contemporary failures of state protection, the movement has redefined security as a practice grounded in care, vigilance, and moral authority. Drawing on feminist security studies, this research shows how the Meira Paibi enact “security from below,” challenging the masculinized logic of militarized governance and offering alternative visions of peace based on community responsibility rather than coercive force.

Securitization theory helps illuminate how the Meira Paibi’s embodied protests, most notably the 2004 naked demonstration, operate as counter-securitizing acts that expose state violence and reconfigure dominant threat narratives. These interventions shift the focus of insecurity from insurgency to state accountability, fundamentally altering the discursive terrain on which security governance rests.

At the same time, intersectional analysis reveals the tensions and constraints within the movement. The Meira Paibi’s maternal authority and cultural legitimacy empower them within Meitei society, yet this same positionality can limit cross-ethnic solidarity and reinforce community conservatism. Their regulatory practices, including curfews, moral policing, and disciplinary interventions, illustrate how grassroots actors can simultaneously resist external oppression and reproduce internal hierarchies.

Finally, intergenerational shifts reveal both continuity and transformation. Younger women increasingly challenge the movement’s moral conservatism and incorporate digital activism, feminist critique, and broader notions of rights into their political engagement. This indicates that the movement’s future relevance will depend on its ability to adapt to new political, technological, and social landscapes.

In sum, the Meira Paibi both confirm and extend feminist security studies by illustrating how everyday practices of care and embodied protest constitute alternative infrastructures of protection. They challenge traditional securitization theory by demonstrating how grassroots actors redefine the locus of threat and authority, and they contribute to intersectionality scholarship by showing how ethnic and generational differences shape access to legitimacy within women’s activism. More broadly, the Meira Paibi case offers valuable insights for global contexts marked by militarization, state neglect, racialized policing, or declining trust in formal institutions.

Future research should examine how younger Manipuri women reinterpret the movement’s ethos and how digital platforms reshape collective action. Such work will be crucial for understanding how the Meira Paibi’s authority and strategies evolve within changing inter-ethnic, technological, and political environments.

## **Implications of the Study**

- Community-led security practices broaden global understandings of protection.
- The Meira Paibi illustrates how communities living under militarized or distrustful state environments generate their own infrastructures of care and vigilance-challenging state-centric assumptions embedded in mainstream security studies.
- Gendered and embodied activism can reshape dominant threat narratives.
- Their use of maternal authority, public visibility, and embodied protest demonstrates how gendered performances can disrupt official securitization logics, exposing the limitations of militarized protection in diverse global contexts.
- Intersectional differences structure legitimacy within grassroots movements.
- Variations in ethnicity, age, and social position determine who is empowered to speak for the community. This insight holds relevance for scholars analyzing social movements, ethnic politics, and minority activism in the U.S., Europe, and beyond.
- The movement offers a comparative lens for alternative justice practices.
- The Meira Paibi's community-centered interventions provide models for understanding how marginalized groups worldwide respond to structural violence, racialized policing, or state neglect by developing localized systems of accountability and protection.

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The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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