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FROM GRASSROOTS AGENCY TO INSTITUTIONAL POWER

Women's Leadership and Gender Mainstreaming in the Governance of Manipur

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Abstract : Women in Manipur have long exercised public influence through collective action, market institutions and community-based activism. Yet this visible social agency has not translated proportionately into formal political representation or routine authority within public institutions. This article examines that gap and considers how gender mainstreaming can connect women's established forms of leadership with accountable decision-making in the state. The study uses a qualitative documentary approach, drawing on historical scholarship, peer-reviewed research, official electoral information, constitutional materials and policy documents. It does not claim primary interviews or field observations. The analysis focuses on three sites of women's public agency: the Nupi Lan movements, Ima Keithel and the Meira Paibi movement. These are treated as historically and socially specific institutions rather than as evidence that all women or communities in Manipur experience politics in the same way. Official data from the 2022 Manipur Legislative Assembly election show that 17 women contested and five were elected, representing 6.42 per cent of candidates and 8.33 per cent of the 60-member Assembly. The paper argues that this electoral snapshot, alongside women's strong presence in collective action, reveals a translation gap between informal influence and institutional power. It develops a context-sensitive framework built around recognition, representation, redistribution, accountability, intersectionality and conflict sensitivity. The framework recommends gender-responsive budgeting, transparent candidate selection, institutional links between women's collectives and government, disaggregated monitoring, safe participation and meaningful inclusion of women from different communities in peace and recovery processes. The article's contribution is to shift the discussion from celebrating women's activism alone to examining the institutional conditions required for that activism to shape public decisions and resource allocation.

IndexTerms - women's leadership; gender mainstreaming; Manipur; Nupi Lan; Ima Keithel; Meira Paibi; political representation; gender-responsive governance; peacebuilding.

I. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between women's public agency and formal political power is a central question in the study of democratic governance. Women may exercise substantial influence in markets, community networks, protest movements and informal systems of care while remaining under-represented in legislatures, political parties and senior administrative positions. The distinction matters because public visibility does not automatically confer authority over laws, budgets, appointments or the design of government programmes. A society may celebrate women's collective action while leaving the institutions that allocate resources and make binding decisions largely unchanged.

Manipur offers a particularly important setting in which to examine this tension. The state's political history includes the Nupi Lan movements of 1904 and 1939, in which women mobilised against colonial-era practices and economic-administrative measures. These movements are remembered as powerful expressions of collective resistance and have become part of the political memory of the state. Scholarship on Meetei women's political engagement cautions, however, against reading visible activism as proof that gendered boundaries between domestic and public life have disappeared. Women's participation can challenge established hierarchies while also being shaped by community norms, social expectations and unequal access to institutional authority (Rojibala, 2021/2022).

Women's economic leadership is also visible in Ima Keithel, the women-managed market in Imphal. The market is more than a site of exchange: it is a space where women's labour, mutual support, livelihood strategies and public presence intersect. Research on women vendors in Manipur highlights the significance of market-based work while also drawing attention to occupational insecurity and the socio-economic conditions under which women participate in the informal economy (Lilee, 2019). Recent work further considers the market as a space of solidarity and resistance, while underscoring the interaction between paid market work and unpaid responsibilities (Devi et al., 2026). The analytical point is not that economic participation automatically produces political equality, but that women's economic institutions can generate networks, knowledge and collective capacity that governance systems should recognise.

The Meira Paibi movement provides another example of women's public leadership. Emerging in the late 1970s, the movement became associated with community mobilisation, night patrols, protest and responses to questions of public security and state violence. Recent documentary scholarship interprets the movement through feminist security studies and intersectionality, showing that women's activism can challenge dominant definitions of security while also containing tensions and internal contradictions (Chaisingkananont & Saisin, 2026). This complexity is important: women-led organisations should not be romanticised as homogeneous or automatically inclusive. Their political significance must be assessed in relation to whose voices they represent, which issues they prioritise and how they engage with state institutions.

The formal political sphere presents a different picture. Government data on the 2022 Manipur Legislative Assembly election record 17 women among 265 candidates and five women among the 60 elected members. Women therefore constituted 6.42 per cent of candidates and won 8.33 per cent of Assembly seats (Press Information Bureau [PIB], 2022). The five elected women represented

a notable moment in the state's electoral history, but the figures also show that women's candidacy and election remained limited. These data are a snapshot of one election, not a complete measure of women's participation in local government, political parties, administration or civil society.

This article argues that the key problem is a translation gap: women's collective and economic agency is not consistently converted into formal representation, institutional influence or gender-responsive public policy. Gender mainstreaming offers a way to address this gap when it is treated not as a symbolic reference to women's needs, but as a practical requirement across policy design, budgeting, implementation and evaluation. The paper therefore moves beyond a descriptive account of women's contributions and asks what institutional arrangements are necessary for women's leadership to shape governance outcomes in a plural and conflict-affected state.

II. Research Problem and Rationale

The central research problem is the uneven relationship between women's visible public participation and their access to formal decision-making in Manipur. Historical mobilisation, market-based economic activity and community activism demonstrate women's capacity to organise and influence public life. However, the presence of women in collective spaces does not by itself guarantee equal access to political parties, electoral resources, legislative committees, administrative leadership or public finance decisions. The problem is therefore not simply a shortage of women's participation; it is the limited institutional conversion of participation into authority and accountability.

The issue is compounded by the state's social and political diversity. Women's experiences cannot be treated as uniform across the Meitei, Naga, Kuki-Zo and other communities, or across rural and urban settings, class positions, age groups and livelihood categories. Scholarship focused on Meetei women's political history is valuable, but it cannot stand in for the experiences of all women in Manipur. A gender-mainstreaming framework must therefore avoid treating a single movement, community or market as representative of the entire state.

Conflict and insecurity make the question more urgent. The ethnic violence that erupted in May 2023 caused large-scale displacement and serious human-rights concerns, including gender-based violence, as documented in international human-rights reporting (U.S. Department of State, 2024). In such circumstances, women may be simultaneously affected by insecurity and active in relief, community protection and peace advocacy. Governance that treats women only as beneficiaries of protection overlooks their knowledge and leadership; governance that expects unpaid activism without providing safety, resources or decision-making power risks reproducing inequality.

III. Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the historical and contemporary forms of women's leadership in Manipur, with particular attention to Nupi Lan, Ima Keithel and Meira Paibi.
2. To assess the gap between women's grassroots participation and their representation in formal political institutions.
3. To analyse the relevance of national and state-level policy and constitutional mechanisms for gender-responsive governance.
4. To identify structural, socio-cultural, economic and conflict-related barriers affecting women's access to leadership.
5. To propose a context-sensitive framework for translating women's agency into institutional influence and accountable gender mainstreaming.

IV. Research Questions

1. What forms of historical, economic and community-based leadership have women exercised in Manipur?
2. What does the 2022 Assembly election data indicate about women's access to formal electoral representation?
3. Which institutional, social, economic and conflict-related factors constrain women's leadership in governance?
4. How can gender mainstreaming connect women's grassroots agency with policy formulation, budgeting, implementation and monitoring?
5. What measures can strengthen inclusive participation by women across Manipur's different communities and social locations?

V. Review of Literature

A. Gendered institutions and women's access to power

Acker's (1990) analysis of gendered organisations provides a useful starting point for understanding why formal institutions may reproduce inequality even when their rules appear neutral. Organisational routines, ideas about the ideal worker or leader, informal networks and divisions of labour can advantage some groups while making others' participation more difficult. Applied to governance, this perspective directs attention beyond the number of women present to the rules and practices that determine who controls agendas, resources and institutional decisions. It also suggests that increasing women's entry into political or administrative institutions is necessary but insufficient if the institutions themselves remain gendered.

Kabeer's (1999) conceptualisation of empowerment as the relationship between resources, agency and achievements is also relevant. Resources include material, human and social resources; agency concerns the ability to define goals and act upon them; and achievements refer to the outcomes of those actions. This framework helps distinguish women's participation from empowerment. For example, a woman may participate in a market or community organisation but lack access to credit, legal protection, political networks or the authority to influence public spending. Empowerment requires the conditions that allow participation to produce meaningful choices and outcomes.

B. Women's political engagement in Manipur

Research on Meetei women's political engagement documents the historical significance of Nupi Lan and later protests, while questioning simplistic divisions between women as protected victims and women as political agents (Rojibala, 2021/2022). This approach is valuable because it recognises that agency is exercised within social structures rather than outside them. It also cautions against assuming that women's public mobilisation has dissolved inequalities in family, community or formal political institutions.

Studies of women's markets show that market participation can provide income, social networks and a recognised public role, while remaining embedded in gendered divisions of labour. Lilee's (2019) study of women vendors in Manipur situates market work within broader questions of socio-economic status and informal employment. Devi et al. (2026) extend this discussion by examining Ima Keithel as a site of women's solidarity and resistance, while noting the pressures arising from the combination of market work and household responsibilities. These studies support an understanding of economic agency that includes both its empowering possibilities and its material constraints.

C. Grassroots activism, security and peacebuilding

The Meira Paibi movement has attracted scholarly attention as a form of women's collective action in a militarised and politically contested environment. Chaisingkananont and Saisin (2026) use feminist security studies and intersectionality to show how women's everyday practices can redefine security beyond conventional state-centred approaches. Their analysis also recognises tensions within the movement, including the possibility that community authority may reproduce conservative social regulation. This balanced approach is important for policy: consultation with women's groups should be meaningful and plural, rather than assuming that any single organisation speaks for all women.

Research on women, peace and security more broadly emphasises that women's participation in conflict prevention, response and recovery should be substantive rather than symbolic. The UN Security Council's Women, Peace and Security agenda, particularly Resolution 1325 (2000), provides an international framework for participation, protection, prevention and relief and recovery. In Manipur, this framework can be applied through inclusive peace consultations, protection mechanisms, survivor-centred services and women's representation in recovery planning. Its application must be grounded in the state's distinct ethnic and political context.

D. Gender mainstreaming as an institutional strategy

The United Nations defines gender mainstreaming as the assessment of the implications of planned actions for women and men, followed by the integration of their concerns and experiences into policy design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation (United Nations Economic and Social Council [ECOSOC], 1997; UN Women, n.d.). The definition makes clear that gender mainstreaming is not a separate project for women alone. It is a strategy for changing the routine processes through which institutions make decisions. It requires gender analysis, participation, resource allocation, implementation responsibility and measurable results.

At the state level, the Manipur State Commission for Women has made available a policy proposal on gender mainstreaming and gender-responsive systems. A Government of Manipur notification dated 2 January 2024 records the publication of a draft Gender Equality and Women Empowerment Policy 2023 for public suggestions (Government of Manipur, 2024). This is an important policy development, but the existence of a draft or proposal should not be confused with full implementation. The relevant research questions concern adoption, budgetary backing, departmental responsibility, monitoring and the extent to which affected women can influence the policy process.

VI. Research Gap and Analytical Contribution

Existing scholarship illuminates the historical role of women in Manipur, their economic participation, their activism and the gendered conditions of conflict. A further analytical step is needed to connect these domains to the everyday machinery of governance. The key gap addressed here is the limited conceptual integration of informal leadership, formal representation and the institutional practice of gender mainstreaming within one framework. The paper does not claim that no prior study has considered these issues; rather, it brings them together to explain why strong grassroots agency may coexist with weak formal representation and uneven policy implementation.

The paper's contribution is a 'grassroots-to-governance' framework. It proposes that women's leadership becomes institutionally consequential when six dimensions operate together: recognition of women's existing knowledge and organisations; representation in decision-making bodies; redistribution of resources and public services; accountability for gender-equality commitments; intersectional inclusion across communities and social positions; and conflict-sensitive participation that protects safety and agency. The framework is analytical and policy-oriented; it is a proposition for further empirical testing, not a validated measurement instrument.

VII. Research Methodology

A. Research design

The study adopts a qualitative, documentary and descriptive-analytical design. It combines historical interpretation with a review of peer-reviewed scholarship, official election information, constitutional and policy documents, and selected human-rights reporting. The approach is appropriate for examining institutional arrangements and public narratives where the objective is to synthesise existing evidence and develop an analytical framework. No interviews, focus groups, surveys or direct field observations were conducted for this version of the paper.

B. Sources and selection

The documentary base includes: (a) scholarly publications on women's political engagement, markets and grassroots movements in Manipur; (b) official election data for the 2022 Manipur Legislative Assembly election; (c) the Constitution (One Hundred and Sixth Amendment) Act, 2023 and relevant national policy frameworks; (d) Government of Manipur and Manipur State Commission for Women policy materials; and (e) international human-rights and gender-mainstreaming documents. Sources were selected for relevance to women's leadership, representation, institutional policy or conflict-related governance. Priority was given to official documents and identifiable peer-reviewed publications where available.

C. Method of analysis

The materials were read thematically. Four analytical themes guided the review: (1) forms of women's agency and leadership; (2) access to formal political and administrative institutions; (3) institutional mechanisms for gender mainstreaming; and (4) the effects of conflict and insecurity on participation, protection and recovery. Evidence was compared across the themes to identify

points of convergence, tensions and gaps. The electoral figures are presented descriptively and are not treated as causal evidence of the reasons for women's under-representation.

D. Scope and limitations

The study is limited by its reliance on secondary sources. It cannot establish the current experiences of all women leaders, determine the internal decision-making practices of every political party or community institution, or measure the implementation outcomes of state policies. Some of the available scholarship focuses specifically on Meetei women and should not be generalised to all communities in Manipur. The 2022 election figures are time-specific and do not describe later electoral developments. Further field research involving women across communities, districts, age groups and livelihood categories is required to test the framework and document local variations.

VIII. Analysis and Findings

A. Historical mobilisation demonstrates political agency, not automatic equality

The Nupi Lan movements remain central to the historical memory of women's collective action in Manipur. They demonstrate that women have intervened in questions of economic justice, administrative practice and political authority. Their significance lies not only in the events themselves but also in the political repertoire they helped establish: collective mobilisation, public protest, solidarity and the assertion that decisions affecting community life are legitimate concerns for women. Historical memory can strengthen contemporary leadership by providing locally meaningful narratives of women's political capability.

However, historical recognition can become symbolic if institutions celebrate women's past contributions without changing present-day access to authority. The existence of a celebrated history of women's activism does not establish that women have equal access to party nominations, campaign finance, administrative promotion or policy committees. A useful distinction is therefore between commemorative inclusion and institutional inclusion. The first honours women's contributions; the second changes the distribution of decision-making power.

B. Ima Keithel: economic leadership and the limits of market-based empowerment

Ima Keithel illustrates the relationship between economic participation and public agency. Women's management of market activity creates livelihoods, social networks, practical knowledge and a visible role in the urban economy. Market institutions may also enable collective action because vendors share concerns about infrastructure, regulation, safety, access to credit and livelihood security. These features make the market a relevant governance partner rather than merely a commercial location.

Yet market participation should not be equated with complete economic empowerment. Informal workers may face insecure income, limited social protection, inadequate infrastructure and the burden of combining paid work with unpaid care. The research on women vendors in Manipur and recent work on Ima Keithel indicate that the economic and social value of women's market activity coexists with structural constraints (Lilee, 2019; Devi et al., 2026). Gender-responsive governance should therefore address the material conditions of women's work: accessible sanitation, safe transport, childcare support, social security, credit, market infrastructure and participation in decisions affecting vendors.

C. Meira Paibi: community leadership and plural accountability

The Meira Paibi movement demonstrates how women's organisations can contribute to community-level security and public accountability. Its activities show that security is experienced not only through state institutions but also through everyday questions of safety, violence, social protection and access to justice. Women's collective presence can make local harms visible and place pressure on authorities to respond. This is a significant form of political leadership even when it does not take the form of elected office.

At the same time, a movement's moral authority should not be treated as beyond scrutiny. Recent scholarship notes that grassroots security practices can contain tensions between resistance, community care and social regulation (Chaisingkananont & Saisin, 2026). A gender-responsive state should engage women's organisations while maintaining rights-based standards, transparency and space for disagreement. Consultation must include women who are not affiliated with prominent organisations, including displaced women, minority-community women, young women and women whose views differ from dominant community positions.

D. Electoral representation remains limited

The 2022 Manipur Assembly election provides a clear, verifiable indicator of women's representation in the state legislature. As shown in Table 1, 17 women contested out of 265 candidates, and five women were elected to the 60-member Assembly. Women therefore represented 6.42 per cent of candidates and 8.33 per cent of elected members (PIB, 2022). The result was historically notable but still indicates that women formed a small minority of both candidates and legislators.

Table 1. Women's participation in the 2022 Manipur Legislative Assembly election.

Indicator	Women	Total	Women's share
Candidates, 2022 Assembly election	17	265	6.42%
Elected MLAs, 2022 Assembly election	5	60	8.33%

Source: Press Information Bureau, Government of India (2022).

These figures should be interpreted carefully. They do not explain why women candidates were fewer, whether nominated candidates had equal access to campaign resources, or how women legislators influenced policy once elected. Nor do they capture women's participation in village-level institutions, civil society or administrative services. Nevertheless, the gap between women's extensive public agency and their limited share of Assembly seats reinforces the need to examine the pathways through which women enter formal politics.

Potential barriers include unequal access to campaign finance, party networks, political mentorship, mobility, safety and time, alongside gendered expectations about public leadership and care responsibilities. These are analytical factors identified in the broader literature and in the problem framing of the original study; this documentary research does not quantify their relative importance in Manipur. Future empirical work should test how these factors operate across different communities, districts and electoral constituencies.

E. Gender mainstreaming requires implementation, not policy declaration alone

The UN definition of gender mainstreaming places responsibility across the full policy cycle: assessment, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation (ECOSOC, 1997). This means that a policy cannot be considered gender-mainstreamed merely because it refers to women or establishes a women-specific scheme. Departments must identify how their decisions affect different groups of women and men, allocate resources accordingly, set measurable objectives and report on outcomes.

The draft Gender Equality and Women Empowerment Policy 2023, published for public suggestions through a Government of Manipur notification in January 2024, provides a relevant institutional entry point (Government of Manipur, 2024). Its significance depends on the steps that follow: formal adoption where applicable, departmental ownership, budget allocation, coordination, public consultation and independent monitoring. The Manipur State Commission for Women can contribute through policy advice, complaint-related information, public consultation and oversight within its mandate. However, a commission cannot substitute for gender-responsive action by every department and local authority.

F. Constitutional reservation is an opportunity whose implementation depends on legal sequencing

The Constitution (One Hundred and Sixth Amendment) Act, 2023 provides for reservation of approximately one-third of seats for women in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies, including provisions relating to Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe representation. The Act was brought into force from 16 April 2026. However, Article 334A links the operation of the legislative reservation provisions to a delimitation exercise undertaken after publication of the relevant figures from the first census conducted after commencement of the Act. Thus, commencement of the constitutional amendment should not be confused with immediate application of reserved seats in a state election (Government of India, 2023; Press Information Bureau, 2026). For Manipur, the constitutional change creates an important future pathway, but it does not remove the need for party-level reform, leadership development and support for women candidates in the meantime.

G. Conflict sensitivity and intersectionality are essential

The 2023 violence in Manipur exposed the consequences of insecurity, displacement and gender-based harm for women and communities. Human-rights reporting documented extensive displacement and serious abuses during the period of violence (U.S. Department of State, 2024). A gender-responsive governance approach must therefore connect women's participation with protection, access to justice, livelihood recovery, housing, education, health services and psychosocial support. These needs should be addressed without reducing women to a single identity or assuming that all communities share the same experience of conflict.

Intersectionality is central to this analysis. Women's access to leadership is shaped not only by gender but also by ethnicity, class, location, disability, age, displacement status, education and livelihood. A process that consults only established urban organisations or a single community may reproduce exclusion while claiming to represent women generally. Conflict-sensitive participation requires safe and accessible consultation, language inclusion, transparent selection of representatives and safeguards against intimidation or retaliation.

IX. Proposed Grassroots-to-Governance Framework

The analysis suggests that gender mainstreaming in Manipur should be organised around six mutually reinforcing dimensions. The framework is intended as a practical guide for state departments, local institutions, political parties and civil-society organisations. It recognises women's existing leadership while identifying the institutional changes needed to translate that leadership into public decisions.

Table 2. Proposed grassroots-to-governance framework.

Dimension	Core question	Illustrative governance action
Recognition	Whose knowledge and leadership are acknowledged?	Recognise women's collectives, market organisations, community mediators and local women leaders as legitimate stakeholders.
Representation	Who participates in decisions, and with what authority?	Improve women's presence in candidate lists, committees, consultations and administrative leadership; track participation by community and location.
Redistribution	Which resources enable women to participate and benefit?	Use gender-responsive budgets; strengthen livelihood security, childcare, transport, market infrastructure and access to services.
Accountability	Who is responsible for delivering gender-equality commitments?	Assign departmental gender focal points, publish annual progress indicators and provide accessible grievance mechanisms.
Intersectionality	Which women remain excluded from the process?	Include women across ethnic communities, rural and urban areas, age groups, disability and displacement status.
Conflict sensitivity	Can women participate safely and influence recovery?	Provide safe consultation, survivor-centred services and meaningful roles for women in peace, relief and reconstruction processes.

Source: Author's analytical synthesis based on the literature and policy materials reviewed.

X. Policy Recommendations

Institutionalise gender analysis across departments. Every department should assess the gendered effects of policies, schemes and service delivery before approval and during implementation. Gender analysis should be integrated into routine planning rather than confined to the Social Welfare Department.

Move from gender budgeting statements to measurable outcomes. Budget documents should identify allocations, intended beneficiaries, implementation agencies and outcome indicators. Departments should report not only how much was allocated but whether women from different social groups actually accessed services and benefited.

Strengthen women's entry into electoral politics. Political parties should publish transparent procedures for candidate selection, expand women's leadership pipelines, provide campaign training and mentorship, and report the proportion of women considered and nominated. Such measures should address structural barriers rather than assume that confidence-building alone is sufficient.

Build formal links with women's collectives. Government departments and local bodies should create regular, accessible consultation mechanisms with market associations, women's organisations, community groups and independent women leaders. Consultation outcomes should be recorded, responded to and made public.

Support women's economic institutions. Policies for women vendors and informal workers should consider safe market infrastructure, sanitation, childcare, transport, affordable credit, social protection and participation in decisions about market management.

Ensure plural and intersectional representation. Consultation and leadership programmes should include women from different ethnic communities, rural and urban locations, displaced populations, persons with disabilities, younger and older women, and informal workers. No single organisation should be presumed to represent all women.

Integrate women into peacebuilding and recovery institutions. Women should participate with decision-making authority in local peace committees, relief planning, rehabilitation, livelihood recovery and monitoring of protection services. Participation must be safe, adequately resourced and attentive to the distinct experiences of affected communities.

Strengthen institutional protection and access to justice. Accessible complaint systems, legal aid, survivor-centred health and psychosocial services, safe transport and protection from retaliation are necessary conditions for women's public participation.

Develop a public monitoring dashboard. The state should publish sex-disaggregated information on elected representatives, candidates, committee membership, senior administrative posts, scheme beneficiaries, budget allocations and grievance redress. Data should be disaggregated where ethically and practically appropriate, with safeguards for privacy and security.

Commission independent and community-led research. Further research should include interviews and focus groups with women across communities and districts, women elected representatives, market vendors, civil servants, displaced women and civil-society actors. Participatory methods can test whether the proposed framework reflects local priorities.

XI. Discussion

The findings support a distinction between women's agency and women's institutional power. Nupi Lan, Ima Keithel and Meira Paibi show that women have shaped public life through protest, economic organisation and community action. These forms of leadership are politically consequential even when they operate outside elected office. However, formal institutions retain authority over legislation, budgets, public appointments and programme implementation. If women's collective influence is not connected to these decision-making processes, it may remain episodic, consultative or dependent on the willingness of individual officials to listen.

The electoral evidence reinforces this point. Five women were elected to a 60-member Assembly in 2022, while women accounted for only 17 of 265 candidates. These figures do not establish the causes of under-representation, but they demonstrate that the existence of a strong history of women's activism has not, by itself, produced parity in legislative politics. Political parties, campaign systems and institutional practices therefore deserve direct attention. A focus exclusively on women's skills or aspirations would risk shifting responsibility away from the organisations that control nominations, resources and access.

Gender mainstreaming provides a route for institutional change, but only when it is backed by responsibility and resources. The UN framework requires gender perspectives to be integrated throughout the policy cycle. For Manipur, this implies that education, health, market regulation, infrastructure, rural development, relief and rehabilitation policies should be assessed for their effects on different groups of women. The state's draft policy proposal offers an opportunity to establish this approach, but its practical value will depend on implementation, monitoring and public accountability.

Finally, conflict sensitivity and intersectionality should be treated as core principles rather than optional additions. In a state marked by ethnic diversity and recent violence, a policy that increases the visibility of one group while overlooking others cannot be considered inclusive. Women's participation must be safe, plural and connected to substantive decisions. The goal is not to place an unpaid burden of peacebuilding on women, but to recognise their leadership while ensuring that state institutions provide protection, resources and accountability.

XII. Conclusion

Women's leadership in Manipur is historically deep and institutionally diverse. The Nupi Lan movements, Ima Keithel and Meira Paibi demonstrate women's capacity to organise, sustain livelihoods, challenge injustice and influence community life. These experiences are not interchangeable, and they do not represent every woman or community in the state. Taken together, however, they show that women's political agency cannot be measured only through electoral office.

At the same time, the 2022 Assembly election data reveal the limits of translating public agency into formal representation: women constituted 6.42 per cent of candidates and 8.33 per cent of elected legislators. The gap between collective influence and institutional authority is the central governance challenge identified in this study. Gender mainstreaming can help address it only if it changes how institutions recognise leadership, distribute resources, include women in decisions and report on outcomes.

The proposed grassroots-to-governance framework links recognition, representation, redistribution, accountability, intersectionality and conflict sensitivity. It calls for action by political parties, government departments, local institutions and civil society. The constitutional reservation framework creates a further opportunity for women's representation in State Legislative

Assemblies, although its application is subject to the constitutional sequencing set out in Article 334A. Meanwhile, immediate reforms in party nomination, public consultation, gender budgeting, safety and institutional monitoring remain essential.

The study is documentary and its conclusions should be tested through field research. Future studies should examine how women across Manipur's communities experience political recruitment, public administration, customary institutions, economic organisations and conflict recovery. Such research can establish which mechanisms most effectively convert women's existing leadership into durable institutional power. A more inclusive governance system will emerge not simply by celebrating women's contributions, but by ensuring that women can shape the decisions, resources and institutions that govern their lives.

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