

**LESSER-KNOWN STORIES
FROM THE PANDEMIC:
NAGALAND'S UNSUNG
WOMEN FRONT-LINE
WARRIORS**

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LESSER-KNOWN STORIES FROM THE PANDEMIC: NAGALAND'S UNSUNG WOMEN FRONT-LINE WARRIORS

'The schizophrenic image of the Naga woman remains a fictitious figure that is nurturing, courageous, sacrificing, moral, hardworking and docile, carrying baskets on her head, feeding the family, or perpetually serving tea and cooking in the kitchen.'

Dolly Kikon, *Centrepiece: New Writing and Art from
Northeast India*

DISCLAIMER: Names have been changed to protect identities.

INTRODUCTION

It was an early afternoon in the beginning of July 2021. My brother and I were returning home in our car after running a few errands and meeting some relatives, whom we had been unable to see for many months owing to the pandemic. The rain had just stopped and the skies still had remnants of the heavy downpour that the town had witnessed for half of the day. As we neared an intersection, I saw cars queuing up from every direction, the drivers eagerly awaiting the signals from the traffic personnel, hoping that it would be their turn to pass. This intersection in question is one of Kohima's busiest and is known as the Tinpati X-junction, that connects some of the most important parts of the town. With cars coming and going in four different ways, and no traffic lights yet, one can only imagine the hurdles that traffic police personnel face while directing and supervising the hundreds of vehicles that traverse these roads every day. I looked out of the window and saw a traffic policewoman standing right in the middle of the intersection with a whistle between her lips, hands ever so busy, signalling to stop the vehicles coming from one direction whilst allowing cars from the opposite direction to pass. This is not a new occurrence. It is something that the general public witnesses every single day, yet it was only on that particular day, at that particular moment, that something suddenly struck me: I wondered if traffic personnel get to sit down, even if just for a few minutes. Standing for the whole day is not only exhausting, but could have health implications in some way. At many intersections across the town, there are no traffic podiums or pedestals—a tiny, hut-like roofed structure that serves as a place from where personnel can stand and direct, and also offers protection from harsh weather elements. Seeing the traffic police personnel also took my thoughts back to all the times, pre-pandemic, when I had seen policewomen patrolling the streets, clad in crisp khakis and carrying arms; a visual that I used to find odd at that point, as I had never seen policewomen or uniformed women in my hometown up until then.

Just a couple of months ago, in early 2021, the country had been devastated by the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, the

worst so far, inducing a second lockdown and claiming hundreds of thousands of lives. Nagaland too was not safe from the second wave, and the second lockdown led many people to reconsider and relook at their priorities, including myself. It was during this critical period that I started to look at discourse surrounding front-line workers, as the spotlight had been on them all throughout the pandemic; this ultimately led me to ponder the question of whether the pandemic had any serious effects for uniformed personnel in general. They are often deemed to be the first responders, next to medical personnel, and yet there were hardly any reports in or coverage by the media on how people in uniform had played active roles in supporting state-driven initiatives and in the implementation of protocols when the pandemic unfolded. These thoughts then shifted to the changing roles that professionals in different settings had to adapt to, ultimately drawing my attention to the women who belonged to such professional settings. I wanted to engage with traffic policewomen as well as other women in uniform to learn if, among other things, the pandemic and the long spells of the lockdowns brought any significant changes in working hours, the nature of work being done, and/or the kind of new roles that they had to get used to—particularly in the districts of Kohima and Dimapur, which served as the base camps for planning, strategising, and implementing almost all logistical and administrative actions related to the pandemic.

This essay is a humble undertaking to understand the role of the women front-line workers who were actively involved at the ground level in the districts of Kohima and Dimapur. To achieve this, the essay is structured around some lesser-known stories of women who belong to different professional settings. I have specifically chosen to focus on the stories of working women in two categories, the first being women in uniform, who are engaged in more labour-intensive work (by virtue of the fact that such occupations are more physically demanding) and the other being women who handle the more formalised, administrative side of things—in other words, a desk job.

GENDERED SPACES AND NAGA WOMEN IN UNIFORM

Like many other patriarchal societies, men and women in the Naga society have gender-specific roles with strict demarcation being more apparent in certain fields than in others. This however does not mean that the preconceived expectations, on what a woman is supposed to perform and conform to, have limited Naga women in breaking the glass ceiling in many areas of life; it simply means that at the end of the day, even if a woman is not barred from holding the post of the head of a department, from being an outstanding professor in a college or university, a dedicated government official, a thriving entrepreneur, or a daily wage labourer, when she comes home, she has to change her role to that of a nurturing mother, a caring wife, a filial daughter/daughter-in-law. The typical Naga women is expected to be passive and obedient and to not have a dominating personality. She is expected to perform her role as the dutiful daughter, wife, or mother of the household. It is true that gender plays a big role in shaping power relations across spaces—the word ‘space’ here is being used to mean both physical spaces and social structures—and the same can be said for the Naga society. Male members of the family, the clan, and the village are the ones who shape dominant narratives because they have access to certain forms of knowledge that have been denied to women by virtue of customary law. Thus, it is the men who have shaped the epistemologies on gender in a society where customary law and traditions continue to take centre stage in discussions surrounding gender equality. French philosopher Michel Foucault had termed this relationship as ‘power/knowledge’ to mean that power and knowledge are intertwined and power is always exercised by those who are in a position to generate knowledge, which is produced and shaped within power relations, and is then accepted by the others outside the power dynamics (Foucault, 1977). Thus, it has always been the men who have had an upper hand when it comes to shaping discourses related to gender, as traditions dictate that men would be and are the custodians of Naga customary laws.

Despite the apparent power structures, a large section of Naga men claim that Naga women are empowered and are not mistreated, justifying this solely with the reason that women are not barred from holding any administrative positions in government departments nor dissuaded from pursuing an education of their choice. Yet, when one steps into a Naga household, there is a glaring difference between what is practised and what is preached. Demarcated gender roles in Naga society existed in the past and exist even today, with women being sent to the kitchen whenever guests come over. For a state that has long denied women political representation¹ and a seat at the table because customary law does not allow for women to take up spaces in tribal politics and village councils, and that bars women from holding the rights to ancestral property, gender equality based on equity is still a dream. Yet, at least in the professional work setting, when the Government of Nagaland created and instituted the 15th Nagaland Armed Police (India Reserve) Mahila Battalion—the first and only Mahila Battalion in the state—in the year 2010, the perception and expectations of which jobs and occupations are considered ‘feminine,’ and which ‘masculine’ were removed, at least theoretically (*Nagaland Post*, 2010).

Given Nagaland’s sensitive political history, marred by insurgency and a perpetual extension of the contentious Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), seeing the Assam Rifles or the India Reserve Battalion (IRB) men with guns almost every day has been the norm. In fact, I remember that as a kid, it felt more out of place if there were weeks when we did not see the army jawans patrolling every corner of Kohima’s small alleyways, than if we saw people with guns and all sorts of army trucks passing through town. The image of a police or army personnel has always evoked the feeling of the job being ‘manly’. Until a few years ago, we could not imagine women to be in combat boots and khaki-coloured uniforms with guns on their back walking around the town. Up until the government instituted the Mahila Battalion in 2010, no one could have envisioned that the people of Nagaland would one day see policewomen as frequently as they saw policemen on the

roads. I was in the 10th standard when I first saw women in uniform, and my initial reaction was one of surprise—and a lot of staring. Many people may have shared this emotion. It was a welcome change, that aimed to remove the image of women being confined only to certain stereotypical occupations.

To first understand how, during the pandemic, women in uniform had a different work schedule from those who had desk jobs. I went to visit my mother's colleague, whom I shall address as Aunty Nana. Through her I was able to meet her daughter-in-law Aka,² a traffic policewoman posted in Kohima, on the November 10, 2021, we had a long conversation on family, motherhood, the pandemic, and her struggles of being a young mother to a four-year-old daughter.

Throughout the lockdown and even in the subsequent months, when the state government imposed periodical restrictions depending on the positivity rates of cases, Aka told me that the only time she took leave from work was when her father-in-law, and her husband's grandmother passed away. 'Traffic personnel, like front-line workers, were not allowed to apply for leave unless they were bedridden or deaths occurred in the family,' Aka says. As we talk, her daughter is in the other room, attending home tuition. The family had to look for someone who could help with the daughter's lessons as both parents were working and could not spare time to teach their young daughter, who had just started school. Due to the extended hours of her work, Aka could barely ever stay home to be with her family through the lockdown, and would only manage to come home to eat and sleep. 'We were front-line workers first and daughters, mothers, and wives second.'

Like Aka, the women whose stories feature in this piece are more than 'tea-serving, smiling figures,' an expression used by Dolly Kikon (2017) to talk about the stereotypical Naga woman in a domestic setting. These women realised that their responsibilities as front-line warriors had to take the upper hand over comfort, and had to compromise on their safety, while also having to bear the emotional pain of being separated from their families for months. This may not

sound unusual to many people, but when it comes to the community that I and these valiant women belong to—which purports to be an egalitarian society—women’s empowerment in every sense of the term is far from being a reality. The claim that gender equality truly exists in a society, which has been built on patriarchy needs to be reconsidered. The situation has been improving since the last decade or so, thanks to the active role taken by the civil society and many organisations that have recognised and demanded the need to move towards a progressive society, and emphasise a more equity-oriented approach. However, Naga society still has many walls to break down and barriers to overcome, as it continues to suffer from a plethora of colonial-era hangovers.

A VISIT TO THE 15TH NAP (IR) BATTALION, CHÜMOUKEDIMA

In December 2021, I visited the 15th NAP (IR) Mahila Battalion’s headquarters, in the newly created district of Chümoukedima (which was earlier under the Dimapur district). The camp is situated away from the bustling town, and through my cousin, a Mahila in the 15th NAP, I was able to schedule a meeting with the Commandant, who was more than willing to allow me to meet some of the Mahilas ready to share their first-hand experiences of what the year 2020 meant to them, and speak on the shift in their roles from maintaining law and order to becoming active responders, as well as how these factors affected their relationships with the people around them. Though preparations were on for a year-end thanksgiving service, the Commandant patiently listened to the purpose of my visit and I was privileged enough to be accommodated in interacting with the Mahilas, despite their busy schedules, and be privy to the stories of some admirable Mahilas. I met Anei³ from the Charlie Coy (Company) who was joined by a few of her

colleagues, and they told me that the announcement of the inevitable nation-wide lockdown sent everyone into a frenzy. Anei says,

We had been hearing about the novel Coronavirus since the end of December 2019, and we had also heard people talking about how other countries were going to lockdown but since it had not reached India yet, we didn't really give a serious thought to the situation. So when COVID-19 reached India, we started panicking because of all the news circulating about the virus. The real panic set in when our superiors came to the camp and told us to be prepared for any situation, and a few days later, the lockdown was announced.

Anei recalls that the first thing she did after the official announcement was pick up her phone to call her parents, who reside in their native village in Phek district, and explain what it (it here has been used as a generic word to refer to the implications and consequences of being detailed as a frontline worker, explaining the same to her parents, as it would not be the same as her normal duties during pre-COVID times) would mean for their daughter as a policewoman, and that she, along with several others, would be at the front lines in the fight against the novel Coronavirus. She tells me that her parents' first response was worry. They asked her to leave her post and to come back home to them, so that 'sop manu mon shanti para thakibo le.' When translated, this statement literally means 'everyone can live peacefully.' However, the real meaning behind these words runs deeper than just living in peace.

The Northeastern states were among the last in the country to record COVID-19 cases. But long before the first COVID-19 case was reported in Nagaland, and before the state opened its borders to welcome the thousands of returning Naga migrants from all over the country, fear-mongering had already found its way in, and nestled itself comfortably among the general public via a multitude of fake content being circulated on social media, primarily on WhatsApp. Associated with this fake content were stigma and discrimination, which

intensified when the first few cases in the state were confirmed from among those who returned home. It is quite an irony that the same people who were a part of a movement that trended hashtags, included long posts on Facebook and raised its voice against xenophobia and the racial attacks on the Northeastern community (Haokip, 2021) would resort to stigmatising not only those who 'brought the virus home,' but also the patient's extended family. Instances have been reported where certain localities and neighbourhoods refused entry to their own residents if they had spent time in an isolation ward or a COVID-19 care facility. Different civil society organisations also started pointing fingers at one another, and at the government, for circulating the virus. Neighbours who had at one time not only shared stories and extended a helping hand during difficult times, but also exchanged whatever dishes they had cooked through narrow paths and often only through windows [in this context, it refers to houses that are separated by a very narrow path. Very often, in the urban areas of Nagaland, barring a few properties which are constructed on plain areas, houses that are let/rented are situated so close to each other merely separated by a thin gate, partly due to improper planning, partly due to lack of space. In such a scenario, the meaning of privacy is itself lost, as neighbours can overhear each other through thin walls. However, this isn't something that is bothersome, for it has become the norm. This sentence can be interpreted to mean that the sense of community, bonding and sharing everything without any reservations that is so strong in the Naga community, with neighbours regarding each other dearer than relatives was broken with the coming of the pandemic. Neighbours that exchanged stories, food and laughter from opposite windows now had to keep their doors and windows shut] now spoke in hushed whispers when the family next to them had a relative who was sick with COVID-19, The proverb, 'Love thy neighbour as thyself' [from the New Testament, in Matthew 22:39], a principle from the Bible that is usually in every Naga's subconscious mind, long forgotten. Even when the patient recovered and went home after the mandated quarantine period, those who lived in the vicinity would

continue to speak ill of the person and the family, going so far as to blame the person for contracting the virus and bringing it into the neighbourhood. It is in this context that the words uttered by Anei's mother are to be understood—more than the fear of contracting the virus, it was the fear of being ostracised and becoming the subject of everyone's gossip that would take away the feeling of being at peace. Anei further elaborates on the reality that she, along with her colleagues, was suddenly subjected to.

Our responsibilities began as soon as the lockdown was announced. In the initial days of the lockdown, we came across quite a few disobedient members of the public: staying out after curfew, or being outside when they are not supposed to be out, and loitering. Duty increased from the normal six hours to eight hours, and standing and patrolling the town for the whole day was very difficult and exhausting. We had strict orders from our superiors to only exempt movement of people and vehicles if it was for medical emergencies. Somehow, throughout the lockdown, everyone said that they were out because of hospital visits and medical needs. We would try our best to enforce the strict lockdown orders, but whenever we told people not to come out of their homes unless there are unavoidable emergencies, they would make snide comments at us and mumble under their breaths, 'Ulta public toh moi khan ke he biya paijai' (the public would feel bad at us). But being police personnel and also front-line workers, we had to patiently deal with every situation and also be tolerant. Every time we stopped a person or a car, we had to keep reminding them of the gravity of the situation, but some people just did not listen.

This indifference to official orders, and the resistance shown not only to police officers but also to other agencies who were entrusted with enforcing lockdown-related measures, might not necessarily be due to the public's ignorance but instead come from other factors such as a collective scepticism, which built up among a certain section of the

population over time, or be a tool of defiance against the government, argue Biswas and Sultana (2020), who in their work analysed why certain groups of the population across India resisted what was termed as ‘the stringest lockdown in the world’ and defied government orders to stay at home. This argument stands ground in the context of Nagaland too, with the public flouting rules and restrictions put in place especially during the first few weeks of the lockdown, which led to the personnel in uniform resorting to some extreme measures, and with media reporting that assaults were carried out on healthcare workers and first responders by the police personnel on duty, these sporadic incidents attracted a lot of public criticism, which lowered the trust of the men and women in khaki in the eyes of the people.

When one is physically drained, emotions also tend to be a whirlwind and even the smallest things tend to irk. Out on the streets for eight hours every day, the patrolling party would often go hungry the whole day as no shops were open. Anei mentions that at times, different clubs, civil societies and organisations doing Samaritan works would offer tea and eatables, but for her and her colleagues, safety and cautiousness on the job were more important than filling their stomachs. ‘No offence to everyone who showed us kindness,’ she reiterates, ‘but we had to not think about food, as our fear of contracting the virus and passing it on to our colleagues took precedence over hunger and thirst. So most of the time, the food we received was left untouched, and we would walk around feeling hunger pangs.’ Anei is careful as she says this, because she does not intend to accuse anyone of carrying the virus, nor imply that the virus would be on the food packages. She and her colleagues foresaw the implications, and the inconveniences that would be caused to the entire battalion, if they took the risk of removing their masks even for a few minutes. Moreover, in the early days of the pandemic, a lot of misinformation about the virus had spread, which led to people believing in many unproven facts about COVID-19 [such as spreading it through food, water, etc.], and so her concerns about spreading the virus if they removed their masks in public were not unfounded. Hearing

this, I began to wonder if these women had somehow tricked their brains into thinking that they could do without water, while being stationed in Dimapur, the district that records the highest summer time temperature in Nagaland. The humidity made their troubles worse. One of Anei's colleagues, whom I met later that day, would go on to tell me that when she was tasked with night duty, she didn't know if it was the humidity, the mosquitoes, or the hunger pangs that would make her cry. Another huge discomfort that came with long hours of patrolling was in accessing toilets and washroom facilities. Anei narrates the difficulties of having to hold in urine while walking around, and looking for safe places to urinate.

The biggest problem that we as women faced was the issue of access to toilets in the public areas. This became even more problematic during menstruation. We had nowhere to go, as even public toilets were shut down, and so having no other option, we would often go to private residences and ask the house owners to let us use their toilets. We had instances where we were not given permission to use their facilities, or where they (house owners) were hesitant to allow us into the premises because they knew—obviously people could tell that we came from outside. Unlike men, we couldn't urinate khushi-khushi at will (anywhere in public spaces) either.

Medical opinions suggest that holding one's urine has a number of consequences, with urinary tract infection and increase in bacterial load being the most common. If sustained over a period of time, it can also lead to other unwarranted bladder issues. Anei and her teammates had to forego something as basic as using the toilet owing partly due to the the absence of facilities, or due to unwelcoming gestures from house owners whenever they asked for permission at residential buildings. Facing such unpleasant experiences with her teammates every day, Anei realised the lack of clean public toilets for women. Almost all public toilets in the urban areas of Kohima and Dimapur do not have water, nor is it cleaned and maintained well. In such a

situation, the waste is left unflushed and the toilets clogged. Even where there were public toilets, they mostly catered to men.

Kinni,⁴ one of Anei's colleagues who had been listening to her friend speak the entire time brought in another perspective. She tells me that she and another teammate were posted as security in a hotel in Dimapur, which was designated as a quarantine centre for those who were coming back home from different parts of the country. Although she feels it was not as physically taxing as what Anei and those on patrolling duty went through, 'Mentally toh mui khan wi quarantine kuria nishena lagishe kile maney hotai din room bitor te he bon kuri na thake... khali ami khan laga face he dikhe' (mentally, it felt as if we were also quarantined along with the returnees because we were always inside, behind locked doors, with only our faces visible).

As for Lem,⁵ who lives with her husband in a rented house in the town of Chümoukedima, being a front-line worker was exhausting in every aspect. She recounts her landlords' attitude and tells me that whenever they saw her coming back from duty, 'Tai khan laga face toh alak hoi jai.' (their faces/expressions would change). She further says,

They began to be scared of me and told me, 'Tui khan nishena para he corona toh ghor te anibo' (it is the likes of you who will bring Corona to the house). 'Bahar te first gosol kuri na he ghor bitor te gushibi' (take baths outside before you come home; only then may you enter the house). I was beyond shocked and could not even answer. How could I take baths outside? Whenever my landlords saw me, they would not talk to me. I would be so tired and worn out after walking and standing for the whole day, only to be met with a very unwelcoming atmosphere the moment I stepped inside the gates.

Lem's experiences as a tenant are not isolated events, as incidents like these have been reported by many people across the state, who had no option but to go to work and respond to the call of duty every day during the lockdown. She adds that there were instances when some of her friends were told to leave their rented houses by their

landlords, and were accused of bringing the virus onto the premises. Her experiences were heartbreaking, and I could not even imagine the suffering she and the rest of the Mahilas went through, irrespective of the duties they were tasked with. ‘On one hand, we policewomen weren’t at peace because of all these accusations directed towards us when we were home. On the other hand, we were troubled with the fact that we had to spend the nights battling mosquitoes, the humidity, and hunger. Any place we were, it wasn’t peaceful. Just as there were people around us who sympathised with us, and respected us for putting our lives at risk, we also had people who ran away out of fear when we came into proximity with them, and threw snide remarks at us,’ she concludes.

As the conversation carries on I ask if any one of them contracted the virus during patrol. Ating⁶ narrates that she was part of the team that was sent on outpost duty for two months in 2020; the platoon that she belonged to stayed in a government school in Dimapur. She says,

We patrolled for around two months [in 2020], and during that time, the people from outside the state started arriving. With that, my company was divided and we formed two platoons. Our platoon covered the whole of Dimapur town until Medziphema. One platoon was put up at the government school, the other sent to the quarantine centres. I happened to be in the platoon that would patrol the town. After the returnees arrived, those on quarantine duty were also released from where they were posted and quarantined in a building next to the school where my platoon was put up. After completing the mandated quarantine period, they were tested for COVID-19, where some of them tested positive and were sent to the hospitals. Those who were tested negative had to be quarantined in yet another centre. However, with more people testing positive for the virus, our platoon too was subjected to testing and I was one of those who tested positive. I was sent to a quarantine centre to isolate and after three days, I was taken

to the COVID Care Centre [CCU]. Along with the other patients, I stayed in the CCU for almost a month. Despite not showing any symptoms, we had to stay for this extended period of time. We were taken care of well by the staff and there was not a single day where the food that was served was bad... However, I have two young sons, aged eight and four, and they had to stay with my parents for the whole duration that I was away for my duties, from March to October 2020. I was only able to go home in December, after completing another round of quarantine at the headquarters [for 14 days] upon being released from the CCU... When I was quarantined at the HQ, my friends and colleagues would cook and send me meals, and also take care of my needs. I am very grateful to them for that. My husband is also in the IRB, and he could not go home even once during the entire lockdown. Post-lockdown, we were only able to meet in December 2020.

For the Mahilas, their responsibilities during the pre-pandemic days were also different from many working women. They had to get used to walking long hours on foot carrying heavy arms that are typically designed for men. Their training periods prepared them physically and mentally for potentially tense situations and these Mahilas have gained recognition from across the country not only for their policing duties but for displaying a wide range of talents on a national platform. (*India Today NE*, 2023). Despite the picture of a tough exterior, these women don the role of caring mothers and daughters once they step foot into their homes, and that, they say is the biggest change that the pandemic brought: their roles dramatically shifted, from caretakers and nurturers in their families to that of front-line workers who had to think about society's greater good over their own selves and families, something which every woman I have interacted with says they were not prepared for.

WOMEN IN ADMINISTRATION AND THE PANDEMIC

While these Mahilas were busy juggling the sudden changes in their normal policing duties, additional working hours, tiredness, and stress, around 60 kilometres away in Kohima, another woman had been on overdrive since April 2020. This woman, who happened to be a close friend of my aunt, was made the overall in-charge of every quarantine centre in the district of Kohima. I shall address her as Ma'am Leno⁷ throughout this piece.

It was a warm evening in mid-November 2021 when I went to my aunt's house and met Ma'am Leno, who lived in the same apartment complex. Hers is a story of dedication, valour and going beyond her limits and capabilities for the sake of ensuring that nothing was out of place when the mass exodus of people to the state started in May 2020. However, unlike most of the Mahilas that I had met and interacted with, ma'am Leno comes from an administrative background; she does not have a job that requires her to perform her duties by walking for six or seven hours, patrolling the town. Recognising her privileges, and driven by the passion and commitment to serve the people without distinction, Ma'am told me what led her to do what she did during the lockdown in 2020.

When she got a phone call in early April 2020 from the then-Additional Chief Secretary of Nagaland, requesting her to be on the team responsible for the arrangements for the returnees from across the country, she had no idea of what would soon unfold and accepted without a second thought. With her accepting the role, the team started by identifying hotels, dormitories, schools, and colleges that could be turned into quarantine centres, that would soon host thousands of Naga migrants, students, and working professionals alike. The first thing she utters when I asked her about her experiences was, 'It was crazy!' She mentions that at times her team got into quarrels with the hotels' managers, who they were adamant about not allowing their hotels to be used as a quarantine facility. 'We tried our best to make them understand that the government needed all the co-operation

they could get, but regardless of what we said, many were unwilling to give up their spaces—and rightly so, because this virus was new and nobody knew how dangerous it could get. So, I don't blame them either.' Ma'am Leno then went on to describe how within 30-40 days, she and her team had to set up around 5000 beds across the quarantine centres in Kohima. Setting up these many beds meant providing all the necessary utilities a person would need during their quarantine period. It meant arranging and placing orders for mattresses, pillows, bedsheets, dustbins, mats, right down to toothbrushes and toothpaste, soaps of different kinds—for washing dishes, for bathing, for washing clothes—providing clean towels, making available hot water, etc. With shops running out of essential commodities, the government had to ask certain marts to remain open, such as Vishal Mega Mart (for Kohima and Dimapur), where they could procure items in bulk and at a cheaper rate. With Ma'am Leno being the only woman in the team and also the one in command, she felt the effects of the physical exertion creeping up on her. People were unwilling to deliver goods, which meant that most of the time, she made the deliveries of the commodities to the quarantine centres by herself. She narrates the hurdles that she faced, commenting on how her responsibility transitioned overnight from sitting behind a desk to suddenly finding herself being placed in the position to get things moving; this time, not with the stroke of a pen, but literally with her own two hands.

I had to request the Commissioner and the Convenor of the Empowered Group to give me a pool vehicle, to transport the goods to and fro, since my private vehicle was small and couldn't accommodate a lot of things. The COVID-19 Empowered Groups were set up by the Centre and such Groups were established at both the national and state levels to manage the crisis in an efficient manner and to facilitate the return and quarantine process of the people returning to their states after the lockdown period. It consisted of senior level government officials and on the same lines, the COVID-19 Empowered Group of Nagaland was also constituted and was

headed by a Convenor). A gypsy was allotted to me, sans a driver, so I literally did everything—the driving, the shopping, the unloading from the car, carrying the load to the centres, and setting it up all by myself. With time, the Government was able to identify more people to join the team, but those initial few weeks were something else.

The announcement of the lockdown, and the brief periods in which people were allowed out to stock up on essential commodities, led to impulsive and/or panic buying, not only in India but across the world. This panic-induced buying behaviour led to shortages of essential commodities in many stores and markets. Though there was no injunction that could be imposed upon people who bought goods and commodities by the dozen/kilo/carton, this behaviour deprived those sections of the society who lived hand-to-mouth of the opportunity to buy essential goods and commodities, who were also those most affected by the consequences of the lockdown. The dearth of goods was also felt by Ma'am and her team at quarantine centres in Kohima and Dimapur—the only two districts where during the initial months of 'Unlock', (a three-phase plan from the Union Home Ministry, which aimed to slowly lift the stringest restrictions put in place during the lockdown) institutional quarantine centres were set up and returnees had to mandatorily undergo the quarantine process in either Kohima or Dimapur before they proceeded to their respective hometowns/districts for another quarantine. Thus, all resources—human, material, capital—were initially concentrated in these two districts.

My team had to 'smuggle' in beds from Assam, because once the lockdown happened and quarantine centres started being set up, there was a shortage of beds. Those folding beds, which came at Rs. 2000-2200 were our only option as we could not afford to spend Rs. 5000-6000 [considering the] thousands of returnees. Incidents such as altercations with the Dimapur administration were common, and my consignments were sometimes taken away by them. The demand for beds here was too much, and it soon got to a point where the Assam

government issued an order to stop supplying the beds outside of Assam, as they were also in need.

She further adds,

I would receive phone calls in the wee hours of the morning, around 1:00 AM or 2:00 AM, from the suppliers who would call me after reaching Dillai Gate—which is one of the entry points to the state via Dimapur—to inform me that consignments had reached and that they required directions to come up to the drop-off point in Kohima. The language barrier made it difficult for me to give directions, as most of them were Hindi-speakers. Moreover, with the lockdown, roads were deserted which meant there were also no passers-by to ask for directions. Somehow, with the little knowledge of Hindi I had, I was able to give them instructions on what paths they should take. This meant I had to sacrifice my sleep, as I would get these calls at the most random hours. Missing the call would mean a delay in the arrival of the consignments, which would affect the smooth flow of the work. I could not afford that.

After days of working at an almost robot-like pace, Ma'am Leno's team was finally ready to welcome an army of returnees, who as per the government's orders, were all to be quarantined in Kohima and Dimapur, even if their actual places of residences/parental homes were in other districts of Nagaland.

I found myself in a place where I was multi-tasking beyond my capacity and was unable to handle the pressure. Therefore, again, with the permission of the COVID-19 Empowered Group we formed another group, which was an all-women team, headed by a Convenor. That's when a colleague of mine took over as [the person] in charge of food at the quarantine centres, then things got a bit better (relaxing). Tasks were evenly distributed amongst this second all-women team, and things became a little less hectic.

Ma'am Leno recalls, with a glint in her eye, how one day, the suspension spring of her pool vehicle snapped in two because of overloading—she was carrying cartons of packaged drinking water, after having received the news that one of the quarantine centres was almost out of potable water. 'I had to drive from the godown till the quarantine centre at a snail's pace. No car-repair shops or mechanics were available, but I could not abandon my vehicle with all the goods either.' In the absence of volunteers to help with ferrying of the goods, she had to make trips herself, which meant that because of the lack of hands, she often had to decide between overloading her car with utilities to save a trip, or carrying fewer goods in her car but making several trips to and fro.

Every other day, the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) changed, and nobody could predict how. Nobody had a ready solution to apply to the situations that would come up. When you do things for the first time, only after you get it done and notice the loopholes, [do] you realise that you could have done it in some other way. If all the work revolved around setting up the centres and letting the medical department take over, it would have been easy.

She notes, 'We had nurses fainting on the job. I can't even imagine what it must have been like in Dimapur.' Every other day, special trains would halt at Dimapur's railway station, and hundreds, if not thousands of men and women would go to their designated quarantine centres. On top of that, there were no vehicles or people to take these returnees home to their respective districts once the mandated quarantine period was over, so it had to be government buses driven by government-hired drivers. As an official who saw firsthand what those at the decision-making level did for the returnees, Ma'am thinks Nagas should learn how to be grateful for every single rupee that was spent on them.

The government spent a lot. Sometimes, we have to be thankful for what our government did, rather than what they

did not do. But here, people like to play the comparison game and blame the system for everything that is faulty, which happened even during the entire course of the pandemic. On the ground, with the arrival of the people, it was chaotic—dealing with that was quite something. I got involved in April 2020 and finished setting up Kohima’s last quarantine centre and handed it over to the district administration on 4 June 2020. Even after handing it over, I was still helping out in the kitchens. However, the point of having kitchens at the quarantine centres did not work out, as people weren’t willing to come and help—and rightly so—because [it meant being] inside the quarantine centres, where people came from all over the country. Finally, under the Deputy Commissioner, the District Task Force formed a community kitchen, named it ‘Bethel Kitchen’ and called in women to cook for the thousands of returnees in quarantine centres all across Kohima, where my colleague was made the convenor, the overall in-charge of the kitchen.

Bethel Kitchen at the Nagaland Baptist Church Council (NBCC) Convention Centre, Kohima was an interesting space, functioning almost like a factory, where there is an assembly line and every worker knows their role, and assembles the raw product as it passes through. It was a community space where everyone, irrespective of tribe, church affiliations, and clan, for the first time since lockdown restrictions were eased with unlock, came together. Many articles have been written on this community kitchen by a host of media houses from all over the country. There would be someone putting rice onto a plate, then passing it on to the next person who would fill it with vegetables, and so on until the last step where someone puts the lid on. Once the food was sent out, volunteers immediately had to start preparing for the next meal. Therefore, despite feeding close to 2000 individuals per day, the work was very well coordinated. Sometimes, various churches would take it upon themselves to prepare the meals for the day; on that particular day, the participating Church’s members would work from

early morning until late at night in the kitchen. In this way, the kitchen became a place that brought a lot of people together. It became the place where we felt a sense of solidarity, as a community, and as Nagas. Ma'am reiterates what I have been thinking: 'The pandemic brought out the best and the worst in us—it was a test of humanity brought by this virus.'

She then tells me how she tested positive for COVID-19 in July 2020.

I was one of the first front-line workers in Nagaland who tested positive. A lot of people didn't know my story but chose to make up different versions of how I contracted the virus. People started assuming that I was moving among officers, infecting other people, which was certainly not what I did. I had completed my fifteen days' mandatory quarantine period after my responsibilities concluded on 4 June. Thankfully, none of my primary contacts tested positive upon contact tracing. The publicity I received after people started naming me as one of the first to contract COVID-19 wasn't called for, and not something I liked—but we are a small community and word spreads like fire, either by word of mouth or through social media. It was kind of amusing too—on one hand, there was a lot of false news about me, and I was labeled as someone who knew [they were] sick yet moved among people; and on the other hand it amused me to know that I had become the subject of conversation all over Nagaland overnight.

However, she took this unwated publicity with a pinch of salt.

After the physical exertion my body had been through for nearly three months, getting to stay in the hospital was a period of recovery, so I did not let rumours get to my head and rested properly at the hospital. The whole experience was intense; at the same time it gave me a satisfaction that I was able to contribute to something, and that was what kept me afloat during the whole ordeal. Otherwise, the criticisms that came

from the public and the inmates alike were very upsetting—there were so many criticisms with regards to the food being served, the beds, the facilities available. We just had to ignore all of these and keep doing what was needed to be done. We couldn't allow every little criticism to affect us, [or it] would, in turn, reflect on the quality of the work that we did.

In between sips of green tea, Ma'am Leno pauses to tell me another story, one that she would never forget and still makes her feel emotional to date.

My colleague and I were thoroughly exhausted one day. At the storeroom of the quarantine centers, there happened to be a lot of unused, new pillows. There weren't rooms or beds for us caretakers to sleep or lie down. That day, we decided to stay in the quarantine centre because exhaustion had overtaken us and we were in no condition to go back to our respective apartments. With our PPE suits still on, we decided to lie upon the pillows. We were both craving tea, but no one was there to even make us a steaming-hot cup of tea. In our dilapidated condition, we couldn't even bring our feet to move to make tea, and so for a few minutes the two of us just kept declaring our wishful thinking out loud; one of us would say 'I really want some tea,' and the other would reply with a 'me too'. This exchange happened for quite a few minutes until my colleague finally got up to make tea for both of us. With a hot cup of tea between our hands, we sat, shared stories, and laughed our worries away. I kept telling her, 'We have to find the humour in every situation,' because the whole ordeal was physically, mentally, and emotionally draining. We found the time to laugh about a lot of things to keep us distracted from our exhaustion. It kept us going—finding the humour in situations when the going gets tough.

What Ma'am meant was not that the pandemic was a funny situation, but she chose to view her daunting responsibilities as

something extreme—and the fact that she found herself doing something beyond her wildest imaginations must have brought a smile to her face; perhaps a thought along the lines of ‘never in my wildest dreams would I ever have thought I would be in charge of overseeing every quarantine centre in Kohima!’

By the time Ma’am ends her musings, we are both overwhelmed, for different reasons. She concludes,

It was a rollercoaster of emotions. Just seeing our sons and daughters come back from the cities, with three-four trolleys in tow, standing and waiting for long hours for their turn to get tested before they board the buses that would take them to the quarantine centers. Seeing those vivid events just makes one teary-eyed. They were all coming back home, leaving behind educational institutions, jobs, and a life they must have worked so hard to build and attain in a faraway place, in a new state, in a new city ... not to a home welcoming them with open arms, but to a home filled with suspicions, side-eyed glances, and fear, as if they had committed something grave and were being sent to the prisons.

CONCLUSION

This essay cannot do justice to the many untold stories of resilience displayed by front-line workers across different sectors during the times of loss and despair caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Women everywhere are to be celebrated for the immense sacrifices they make on a daily basis, and more so for the women front-line workers of Nagaland, who gladly sacrificed their time with their young children and their aging parents, and had to leave the security and comfort of their homes. The title of ‘front-line warriors’ thus is a fitting label to be given to these valiant women, who continue to inspire many.

NOTES

1. When this essay was first written in December 2021, this statement held true. While this essay was being edited, Urban Local Bodies elections were held in Nagaland after a gap of twenty years on 26th June 2024 across Nagaland (barring the 6 districts comprising Eastern Nagaland which boycotted the elections) with 33% reservation for women, ushering in a change and welcoming positive results that are owed to years and years of women-based civil society organisations fighting for political representation in local bodies.
2. Aka (named changed), woman traffic police, in conversation with the author in November 2021.
3. Anei (name changed), in conversation with the author, Chümoukedima, 22 December 2021.
4. Kinni (name changed), in conversation with the author, Chümoukedima, 22 December 2021.
5. Lem (name changed), in conversation with the author, Chümoukedima, 22 December 2021.
6. Ating (name changed), in conversation with the author, Chümoukedima, 22 December 2021.
7. Ma'am Leno (name changed) in conversation with the author, Kohima, November 2021

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