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Women of Nagaland in Public Life

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Abstract

This article examines the careers of some of the prominent women from Nagaland in public life, their contributions and roles, Naga Mothers' Association and its leaders, whose work in peace-building and in the campaign for one-third reservation in urban local bodies plays a crucial role that culminated in the civic elections of June 2024. The article argues that Naga women repeatedly widened public space through community institutions before formal politics admitted them, and that the achievements of 2023–2026, though real, remain unfinished. The participation of the Naga Women in Public life had its roots to the year old decades of armed conflict between Naga underground groups and Indian security forces which shaped the activism that followed. Women's rights advocates have long argued that women were among the worst victims of militarisation, suffering rape, murder and other violence. From this experience grew an unusual kind of authority. As the Naga Mothers' Association (NMA) would later argue, mothers could speak to fighters on every side as the parents of the young men who were dying, and they could plead for an end to the killing in a language that other negotiators found hard to refuse yet the formal political arena remained closed to them.

Keywords: Naga Women, Women in Nagaland, Women in Naga society.

Introduction

A commentary circulated by the Network of Women in Media, India, makes the point plainly: a Naga woman may work a field, run a household and tend a kitchen garden, but under customary practice she cannot claim the land as her own, or inherit it if it is ancestral property ("Why the Media Fails," n.d.). This tension between informal influence and formal exclusion runs through almost every biography in this article. The article first considers women in formal politics, from Rano Shaiza's election in 1977 to the Assembly and civic-body elections of 2023 and 2024. It then turns to peacemakers and social reformers; to writers, scholars and journalists; and to athletes and musicians. It closes with Sümi women in customary and church leadership, where women's advances meet an organised customary response.

Women in Formal Politics

The First Woman Parliamentarian: Rano M. Shaiza

Rano Mese Shaiza was born on 11 November 1928 and died at her family home in Kohima on 1 April 2015, at the age of 86. She taught in a school before joining the Naga movement; she

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was the sister of Sano Vamuzo and a niece of Zapu Phizo ("Former MP Rano Shaiza," 2015; "Rano M. Shaiza," n.d.; "Sano Vamuzo," n.d.). In the general election of March 1977 she stood for the United Democratic Party (UDP) and won the state's single Lok Sabha seat, defeating the sitting chief minister, Hokishe Sema of the Indian National Congress ("Nagaland's First and Only Woman MP," 2015; "Rano M. Shaiza," n.d.). She thereby became the first woman from Nagaland to be elected to any legislative house, a distinction she held alone for four and a half decades ("Former MP Rano Shaiza," 2015; "Participation of Naga Women," n.d.).

Her parliamentary record is modest in volume but significant in meaning. The Lok Sabha's own obituary reference remembers her as an educationist associated with women's, children's and youth organisations, and as a member of the Committee on Petitions during the Sixth Lok Sabha (Lok Sabha Secretariat, n.d.). Her later electoral efforts were less successful. She contested the 1982 Assembly election from Western Angami, one of the few women to contest Assembly seats in the early decades of statehood (Lok Sabha Secretariat, n.d.; "Participation of Naga Women," n.d.). Commentators have noted, fairly, that her family and political connections eased her path in a way that was not available to most women. She was also among the founding supporters of the NMA, which campaigned for total prohibition ("Nagaland's First and Only Woman MP," 2015; "Naga Peace, Elections, Women," n.d.).

The Rajya Sabha and the Chair: S. Phangnon Konyak

After Rano Shaiza's victory, no Naga woman entered Parliament for forty-five years. That gap closed in March 2022, when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) nominated its state Mahila Morcha president, S. Phangnon Konyak, for Nagaland's lone Rajya Sabha seat. She was elected unopposed and became the first woman from the state to sit in the Rajya Sabha ("Hekhani Jakhalu, Salhoutuonuo Kruse," 2023; "Phangnon Konyak," n.d.). In July 2023 the Rajya Sabha Chairman, Jagdeep Dhankhar, reconstituted the panel of Vice-Chairpersons so that half its members were women, and Konyak was one of the four named, alongside P. T. Usha, Fauzia Khan and Sulata Deo. On 25 July 2023 she presided over the House, the first woman from Nagaland to do so, and she described the experience as one that left her humbled and overwhelmed ("Phangnon Konyak Becomes 1st Woman MP," 2023; "Rajya Sabha Chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar Nominates," 2023). Prime Minister Narendra Modi publicly expressed his happiness at the moment, and a speech recorded in the Rajya Sabha debates of 4 February 2025 again described her as having made history by serving on the Panel, the first woman from Nagaland to hold that position (Prime Minister's Office, Government of India, 2023; Rajya Sabha, 2025).

Her election came amid widespread controversy related to the Oting massacre, yet it was read as a signal of strength and resilience: a Naga woman could succeed at the national level even while the state's own Assembly remained closed to women. She became the second Naga woman parliamentarian after Rano Shaiza.

From Social Enterprise to the Assembly: Hekani Jakhalu

Hekani Jakhalu was born in 1976 at Toluvi near Dimapur. She attended Bishop Cotton Girls' School and went on to study at Lady Shri Ram College for Women, the Faculty of Law at Delhi University and the University of San Francisco, where she earned an LLM ("Hekani Jakhalu

Kense," n.d.; "Video | Nagaland Gets Women MLAs," 2023). Before entering politics she set up YouthNet, a Kohima-based organisation that works on youth skills, livelihoods and entrepreneurship, and her work earned her the Nari Shakti Puraskar in 2018 ("Historic: Nagaland Finally Elects 2 Women MLAs," 2023; "Nagaland 2023: Is Nagaland Ready," 2023). In the 2023 Assembly election she contested the Dimapur III seat and defeated Azheto Zhimomi of the Lok Janshakti Party (Ram Vilas) by 1,536 votes, becoming one of the first two women ever elected to the Nagaland Legislative Assembly. Reporters described a contest in which the lead changed several times before the final result ("Hekhani Jakhalu, Salhoutuonuo Kruse," 2023; "Historic: Nagaland Finally Elects 2 Women MLAs," 2023; "Nagaland Scripts History," 2023). YouthNet, the organisation she founded, remains active; in June 2025 it helped route Startup India Seed Fund support to nine Nagaland-based start-ups. A recent reference entry lists her party as the Naga People's Front ("Hekani Jakhalu Kense," n.d.). On winning, she said she felt doubly happy because a woman had also been given a cabinet berth in the new government ("Nagaland Gets Woman Minister," 2023).

The First Woman Minister: Salhoutuonuo Kruse

Salhoutuonuo Kruse was born in December 1966 as Salhoutuonuo Kruneilie and graduated from Kohima College. During the campaign she was described as a hotel owner and social worker ("Historic: Nagaland Finally Elects 2 Women MLAs," 2023; "Salhoutuonuo Kruse," n.d.; "Salhoutuonuo Kruse Nagaland MLA," 2023). She won the Western Angami seat in 2023 by the narrowest of margins: the reported tally was 7,078 votes against 7,071 for the sitting MLA, Keneizhakho Nakhro, a difference of seven. The result drew wide notice because the late Rano Shaiza had contested the same constituency forty-one years earlier and lost ("Hekhani Jakhalu, Salhoutuonuo Kruse," 2023; "Participation of Naga Women," n.d.; "Salhoutuonuo Kruse," n.d.). On 7 March 2023 Kruse took the oath as part of Chief Minister Neiphiu Rio's fifth cabinet and was assigned the portfolios of Women Resource Development and Horticulture, becoming Nagaland's first woman cabinet minister ("Cautious Optimism," 2023; "Nagaland: 5th Time CM Neiphiu Rio," 2023; "Nagaland CM Distributes Portfolios," 2023).

Peacemakers and Social Reformers: *The Naga Mothers' Association*

If one institution explains how Naga women acquired public standing before they acquired seats in legislatures, it is the NMA. It was founded in Kohima in 1984 (some accounts place the first gatherings of its founders in 1983) as the first voluntary organisation open to women of all Naga tribes, with the motto Human Integrity (Baptist World Alliance, 2025; "Naga Mothers' Association," n.d.; "Padma Shri Sano Vamuzo Expresses Deep Concerns," 2024). Its earliest concern was the damage that drug addiction and alcoholism were doing to Naga homes. A founder later explained that addiction was the biggest issue affecting families at the time, and the campaign for total prohibition in the state drew on this work ("Nagaland's First and Only Woman MP," 2015; "Naga Mothers' Association," n.d.; "Neidonuo Angami," n.d.-a).

The NMA's identity as a mothers' body was deliberate. Because mothers lose children on every side of a conflict, they could approach underground factions and government representatives without being seen as partisans. In 1994, as violence among Naga factions intensified, the

association created a peace team and launched the Shed No More Blood campaign, which brought Naga underground leaders into meetings where they heard directly about the grief of mothers ("India: Neidonuo Angami," n.d.; "The Mothers of Nagaland," 2019; "Nagaland Peace," n.d.). In 2013 the association received the Times of India Social Impact Award for lifetime contribution ("Naga Mothers' Association," n.d.; "Virtual Lecture," n.d.).

The Mother of Peace: Neidonuo Angami

Neidonuo Angami was born in Kohima on 1 October 1950. She lost her father at the age of six, when he, a government official, was killed by insurgents, and she spent part of her childhood hiding in forests during the early years of the conflict. In the early 1970s she worked as a teacher in Kohima and founded the Nagaland Weavers' Association, which helped artisans reach trade fairs ("India: Neidonuo Angami," n.d.; "Neidonuo Angami," n.d.-a; "Peace Women," 2005). In 1984 she helped create the NMA; she served as its general secretary until the early 1990s and then held its presidency for two terms. Under her leadership the association responded to drug use, alcoholism and the arrival of HIV and AIDS in the state ("Neidonuo Angami," n.d.-a; "Neidonuo Angami Receives NNagaDAO Award," n.d.). Her best-known contribution is the Shed No More Blood campaign, in which women went to the leaders of armed groups to plead for an end to killing among Nagas ("India: Neidonuo Angami," n.d.; "Neidonuo Angami," n.d.-b). The Government of India awarded her the Padma Shri in 2000, and in 2005 she was among the 1,000 women collectively nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize ("Neidonuo Angami," n.d.-a; "1000 Women for Nobel Peace Prize," 2005). Later honours include the NNagaDAO award, and in the Naga community she is often referred to simply as a mother of peace ("Neidonuo Angami Receives NNagaDAO Award," n.d.; "Virtual Lecture," n.d.).

Padma Shri and a Global Human-Rights Award: Sano Vamuzo

Sano Vamuzo was born on 27 March 1940. She studied at Guwahati University, Bombay University and North-Eastern Hill University and worked as an educator. She is the wife of the late chief minister Vamuzo Phesao and the younger sister of Rano Shaiza ("Sano Vamuzo," n.d.; "Sano Vamuzo Conferred Padma Shri Award," 2024). As a founder of the NMA she served as its first president from 1984 to 1991 and later as an adviser; she was also the first chairperson of the Nagaland State Commission for Women, a post she held for two terms ("Honoured and Humbled," 2024; "Sano Vamuzo Conferred Padma Shri Award," 2024). In January 2024 she was announced as a Padma Shri recipient for social work, and she received the award from President Droupadi Murmu at Rashtrapati Bhavan on 9 May 2024. Reports described her as the second NMA leader after Neidonuo Angami to receive the honour, and Dimapur civil society welcomed her at the airport on her return (Ambrocia, 2024; "Honoured and Humbled," 2024). In July 2025 she received the Baptist World Alliance's Congress Quinquennial Human Rights Award at the Baptist World Congress in Brisbane, in recognition of what the Alliance called Christian witness in service of human rights and social justice ("NMA Fetes Advisor," 2025; "Padma Shri Sano Vamuzo Expresses Deep Concerns," 2024; "Sano Vamuzo Receives BWA Human Rights Award," 2025).

Scholar, Adviser and Negotiator: Rosemary Dzüvichu

Rosemary Dzuvichu teaches English literature at Nagaland University, has directed its women's studies centre, and is the long-time advisor to the NMA. Her activism grew out of what she saw in the women of her own family and out of the expectation that women in traditional Naga society would stay in a supporting role ("Fighting for Rights," 2017; Hangal, 2012; "Women Have Strength," n.d.). She has held roles with the Naga People's Movement for Human Rights, the Forum for Naga Reconciliation and the Global Naga Forum, and she has served as president of the Nagaland University Teachers' Association ("Rosemary Dzuvichü Conferred Peace Award 2022," 2022).

She has been the intellectual and strategic face of the campaign for women's reservation. When the NMA decided that Naga women should have the one-third quota guaranteed elsewhere in India, patriarchal opposition cited customary law; she and her colleagues answered that reservation did not conflict with customary law ("Fighting for Rights," 2017; "Naga Mothers' Association," n.d.). She has also argued that peace cannot last while women remain excluded from decision-making, and that gender equity should be understood as a partnership with Naga men rather than a threat ("Peace Is Possible," n.d.; "Rosemary Dzüvichü Conferred Peace Award 2022," 2022). In October 2020 she led a seven-woman delegation, sponsored by the Global Naga Forum, to Delhi, where the women urged Naga leaders and central representatives to reach an early and inclusive settlement. In September 2022 a peace organisation in Chümoukedima gave her its Peace Award for this work ("Naga Women Peace Delegation for Early, Inclusive Settlement," 2020; "Naga Women Peace Delegation Meets Central Representatives," 2020; "Rosemary Dzüvichü Conferred Peace Award 2022," 2022).

Writers, Scholars and Journalists

Temsüla Ao (1945–2022)

Temsüla Ao, an Ao Naga poet, short-story writer and ethnographer, was born on 25 October 1945 and died in Dimapur on 9 October 2022, a few days short of her seventy-seventh birthday ("Renowned Writer Temsula Ao Passes Away," 2022; "Temsüla Ao," n.d.). She taught English literature at North-Eastern Hill University in Shillong and directed the North East Zone Cultural Centre in Dimapur between 1992 and 1997. She received the Padma Shri in 2007, the Meghalaya Governor's Gold Medal in 2009 and the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2013 for her story collection *Laburnum for My Head* (Das, 2020; "National Treasure Temsüla Ao Remembered," 2022; "Temsüla Ao," n.d.). Her best-known fiction, *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*, presents everyday life in the shadow of insurgency and counter-insurgency. Her scholarly book *Ao-Naga Oral Tradition* appeared in 2000, and her memoir *Once Upon a Life: Burnt Curry and Bloody Rags* in 2014 ("Temsüla Ao," n.d.). She wrote poetry that tied women's lives to nature and history, and she also performed jazz poetry with a band called Jazzpoesi. In January 2013 she became chairperson of the Nagaland State Commission for Women, where she argued that Naga customary law should be reconsidered to remove its gender bias without being discarded as the bedrock of Naga society (Das, 2020; "Ethno-Cultural Identity of Northeast India," n.d.; "Temsüla Ao," n.d.). Her former student

Easterine Kire called her death the loss of a national treasure ("National Treasure Temsüla Ao Remembered," 2022).

Easterine Kire

Easterine Kire was born in Nagaland in 1959, took a doctorate in English literature at Pune University, and now lives in Norway. Her first poetry collection, *Kelhoukevira* (1982), was the first book of English poetry published by a Naga writer, and her 2003 novel *A Naga Village Remembered* was the first Naga novel in English ("Easterine Kire," n.d.-a; "Easterine Kire," n.d.-b). She won a wide readership with *When the River Sleeps*, which received the Hindu Prize for Fiction in 2015, and she was awarded the Sahitya Akademi's Bal Sahitya Puraskar in 2018 for *Son of the Thundercloud*. On International Women's Day in March 2024 she was presented with the Sahitya Akademi Award for English writing ("Easterine Kire," n.d.-b; "Easterine Kire Iralu," 2025; Krocha, 2024). Kire has said that many Naga women are natural storytellers whose literary work comes in addition to their roles as homemakers, researchers and teachers. Scholars read her fiction as rooted in oral history and in the experience of Naga women within the long Indo-Naga conflict, and a comparative study has examined the ecofeminist threads in her work and that of Temsüla Ao (Das, 2020; "Easterine Kire Iralu," 2025; Krocha, 2024). A new generation of Naga women writers is now visible: at the 2025 Myki Fest, a literary session called Her Stories brought together a home-grown anthology with contributions from writers including Vishü Rita Krocha, Avinuo Kire and Elongshila Jamir ("Myki Fest 2025," 2025).

Monalisa Changkija: Journalist and Editor

Monalisa Changkija was born in Jorhat in 1960 into an Ao Naga family. She began her career in journalism in the 1980s and founded the English daily *Nagaland Page* in Dimapur in May 1999 ("Interview With Monalisa Changkijia," 2015; "Monalisa Changkija," n.d.). She was the first woman in the Northeast to serve as editor, publisher and proprietor of a daily newspaper; she shared the 2009 Chameli Devi Jain Award for outstanding women mediapersons and received a FICCI Women Achiever of the Year award in 2014 ("Interview With Monalisa Changkijia," 2015; "Monalisa Changkija's Latest Book Middles Released," n.d.; "Online Even More Taxing Than Print," 2025). The paper stopped publishing on 21 December 2024, after twenty-five years; she cited financial and personal reasons and said she would continue as a writer. In December 2025 she was named for the Kalyan Barooah Lifetime Achievement Award for journalism in the Northeast ("Monalisa Changkija," n.d.; "Monalisa Changkija Honoured," 2025; "Online Even More Taxing Than Print," 2025). She is also a poet with three collections, and her essays in the book *Middles* describe what it was like to produce news in Nagaland as a woman ("Book Review: Learning of Life," n.d.; "Veteran Journalist Monalisa Unveils," n.d.).

Dolly Kikon: Anthropologist

Dolly Kikon, from Dimapur, represents a different strand of Naga women's intellectual leadership. She received her doctorate in anthropology from Stanford University in June 2013, and her research has examined Naga participation in Indian electoral politics, development efforts by security forces and the Indo-Naga ceasefire. She is now at the University of California, Santa Cruz, where she has directed the Center for South Asian Studies since 2024

("Dolly Kikon," n.d.; "Nagalim: Elite University Awards PhD," 2013). Beyond scholarship, she has joined other Naga women in a petition urging gender-inclusive political participation ("Dolly Kikon," n.d.).

The First Woman Gaon Bura: Teli Kiba

Teli Kiba of Ighanumi, a village below Chozuba, is the earliest documented Naga woman to hold the office of Gaon Bura (GB), the government-recognised village headman introduced under British rule. A feature in the *Morung Express* places her appointment in the 1940s, and a compiled list of Naga firsts gives the same period ("List of the First Naga," n.d.; Ovung, 2012). According to the feature, a complicated dispute had defeated the local GBs, and Deputy Commissioner Charles Pawsey came to the village to settle it. When the frightened villagers hid from the officer, Teli called them back to the hearing, and when none of the GBs could explain the case, she did so herself in the Chakhesang dialect used by the GBs of the area. Pawsey is said to have been so impressed that he tore a strip from the GB's shawl and placed it on her shoulders (Ovung, 2012). Her husband, Ghopfuna Kiba, had been the village GB until his death in 1936, and the couple are described as the first converts to Christianity in their village and as hosts of the Kohima Elakha Baptist Association in 1912, reported as the first Baptist association held in Nagaland (Kiho, 2024, p. e89; Ovung, 2012).

The reforms attributed to her anticipate arguments that Naga women still make today. When her brother-in-law removed the three hearthstones from her kitchen, the customary sign that a widow without a son must leave, she took the matter to Pawsey, who declared her the sole heir of her husband's property and penalised anyone who harassed her (Ovung, 2012). As GB she abolished the penalty on animals that grazed in another man's field, reasoning that animals cannot reason. She is also credited with recognising a widow's absolute right over her late husband's property even if she had no son or remarried, and a daughter's right to inherit when the parents had no male heir. She was unlettered, yet the feature stresses her intelligence and logic. A 2024 academic paper still treats her as the only woman ever to hold the chief's position in Sümi history, although a 2023 report, discussed below, describes a second woman chosen as village chief (Kiho, 2024, p. e89; Swu, 2022, p. 445).

Village Chiefs and Council Leaders

In August 2023 the village of Kiyevi chose Satoli Z. Swu, a 63-year-old retired government teacher and mother of six, as its village chief. She was draped with the red shawl of the Gaon Bura at a dedicatory prayer service on 3 August 2023. She is the widow of Zheshito Swu, and she described her role as a chance to promote reconciliation between the Sümi and Zeliang communities in a boundary dispute that had lasted four decades ("Naga Village Elects Satoli Z Swu," 2023). At the level of village councils, Tokheli Kikon is recorded as the first Sümi woman to chair a village council, at Naharbari village in Dimapur district (Swu, 2022, pp. 443–444). Suniho Zhimomi became the first Sümi woman to serve as Village Development Board (VDB) Secretary, at Xukhepu in Zünheboto district, holding the post for two consecutive terms from 2009 to 2018. She was elected unanimously, received the President's Nirmal Gram Puraskar in 2011 and was named the best VDB secretary in Zünheboto in 2017 (Kiho, 2024, p. e90).

The First Woman Reverend of Sumi

On the specific question of the first woman reverend, the sources are less firm than for licensing. A 2022 study records Mrs. Vihoni Awomi of Nihoto village as the first ordained and licensed woman pastor, but it gives no date or denomination, so the claim cannot be treated as settled without confirmation from the relevant ordination board (Swu, 2022, p. 444). The wider Naga record also shows different claims depending on denomination. A funeral report calls Rev. Beilieü Shüya (born in Kohima in 1928) the first Naga woman to be ordained, in 1978 at a World Mission Conference in Chennai. A list compiled by the Women's Department of the Nagaland Baptist Church Council, by contrast, records Rev. Dr. L. Noksangla as ordained by an Ao Baptist body in 1992 and Rev. Sennangchila as pastor at Sungratsü in 1993 ("Opening Pandora's Box," n.d.; "Rev Beilieü Shüya," n.d.).

Conclusion

The women described in this article come from different tribes, professions and generations, yet their stories converge on a common theme: they have made space where none was offered. Rano Shaiza showed in 1977 that a Naga woman could win a parliamentary contest, and it took until 2022 and 2023 for that example to be followed. Mothers' associations, scholars, writers etc. prepared the ground in the long interval. By 2026, Nagaland has a woman cabinet minister, a woman who has chaired the Rajya Sabha, women councillors in its towns, a Padma Shri laureate recognised by a global Baptist body, The task ahead is to make such achievements ordinary rather than exceptional. That will require legal clarity on reservation, continued investment in girls' sport and women's enterprise, and support for the institutions that sustained women through decades of conflict. The death of Vilanuo Angela Yhome in July 2026 is a reminder that the generation who built these institutions is passing, and that the next generation will need to carry their work forward.

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