

The Interplay of Women's Empowerment and Economic Development in Tangkhul Naga Society

Dr. Oinam Shantibala Devi¹, Yaoyo M. Vashum², Themchuiso M. Vashum³

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Liberal College
Email: oinamshanti69[at]gmail.com

²Research Scholar, Department of Sociology, Manipur University
Email: yaoyomvashum158[at]gmail.com

³Research Scholar, Department of Political Science & Human Rights, IGNTU-RCM
Email: themchuisovashum12[at]gmail.com

Abstract: *Empowering women is not just a moral imperative but also an economic necessity. This article examines the importance of investing in women's economic empowerment which will further lead to achievement of gender equality, poverty eradication, and involvement in economic decision making. True empowerment comes from collective action where both men and women work together to create an equitable society. Empowering women ultimately benefits society as a whole. Economic development plays a significant role in driving down inequality between men and women. Also, development benefits a great deal from empowering women. Tangkhul Naga women play a pivotal role in agricultural practices, household management, and local business initiatives which are essential for sustaining family livelihoods and community welfare. The article also highlights the evolving role of Tangkhul women in contemporary economic contexts, where increasing educational opportunities and initiatives like SHGs are fostering greater participation in formal employment and entrepreneurship. Despite their substantial contributions, Tangkhul Naga women face challenges related to limited access to resources, patriarchal societal structures, and the undervaluation of their labour, particularly in the informal sector. Systemic barriers remain that hinder their full economic potential. By examining the intersection of gender and economic development within the Tangkhul Naga community, this study underscores the importance of recognizing and supporting women's roles as key drivers of economic growth and social change.*

Keywords: Tangkhul Naga women, economic development, socio-economic growth, women empowerment

1. Introduction

Manipur is situated in extreme corner of the North Eastern states of India. The state is situated between 93°58'E and 94°45'E longitude and between 23°53'N and 25°45'N latitude. It is bounded on the North by Nagaland, on the east by a foreign country called Myanmar, on the south by Mizoram and Chin hills of Burma, on the west by Cachar districts of Assam. The Tangkhuls inhabited in the east districts of Manipur. Recently it has got two districts viz., Ukhrul and Kamjong districts. Ukhrul is a small town in the state of Manipur, and it is the administrative headquarter of Ukhrul District.

The definition of economic development has been contested: economists in the 20th century viewed development primarily in terms of economic growth; sociologists instead emphasized broader processes of change and modernization. The role of women in economic development has been recognized as vital for inclusive and sustainable growth. Complete equality in all aspects of the social order regardless of gender is crucial to realize gender equity. Empowering women ultimately benefits society as a whole. Economic development plays a significant role in driving down inequality between men and women. Also, development benefits a great deal from empowering women.

The process of development involves not only structural changes in the economy but also concurrent changes in the social pattern of the people. Further, the changes involved are not uniform over a wide area. It thus has a spatial

dimension. Again, the whole gamut of economic activities cannot be viewed in the context of space in isolation, for these are often influenced by social and political processes and patterns. Thus, the objective of any rural development could not be broadly classified separately in terms of economic, social and political objectives. The three aspects are obviously interrelated (VS. Khathing, 2008).

Empowering women involves personal and social change. It mutually reinforces psychological, political, social and economic domains, and through which women individually and collectively gain power, meaningful choices and control over their lives (O'Neil et al., 2014). In many rural societies, a woman often merges her identity with that of her husband and hence perceives herself as a subordinate person. Instances of subordinating and controlling women, which is a social construct based on the principle of male domination continues to exist in the camouflage of tradition and religion. According to Datta and Kornberg (2002), women empowerment refers to strategies that women use to increase their control of resources and generate decision making capacity. Women are considered key agents of change as they play a critical role in enhancing food security, poverty reduction, and sustainable development. Moreover, women's empowerment has been linked to several positive outcomes, including improved health and education outcomes for themselves and their families (Kabeer, 1999).

Women tend to be involved in more than one economic activity simultaneously, and take up informal and unprotected work in the absence of alternative means of generating income. Rural women spend more time than

urban counterparts, and then men, on reproductive and household work, including time spent collecting water and fuel, husking, processing food and caring for children and the sick.

In recent times, the issues relating to women's well-being that enhances their status at home and at society have come to receive better attention. This turn-around has much to do with the spread of education in general, and education of women in particular, empowering them to assume responsible office of decision-making and financial independence in the world so far dominated by men.

2. Literature Review

Horam (1977) in his study 'Social cultural life of the Nagas (the Tangkhul Nagas)' draws the extensive field study, observation and experience depicting Tangkhul science in totality. It highlights several aspects of traditional, social and cultural life and also the recent changes in the norms and customs. The work includes the Tangkhul myths and ballad. This monograph is the first to offer an intimate study of the Tangkhuls.

VS Khathing (2008) in his 'A study on the impact of IFAD project in Ukhrul district with special reference to micro-credit delivery through SHGs' studied the impact of SHGs on individual household and communities. Various categories of activities through SHGs have been identified. He has also assessed the impact of micro-credit through SHGs on the socio-economic development in Ukhrul district.

Jamir (2023) in her article 'Women's contribution towards economic development in Naga society' highlighted the contributions made by Naga women in the development of economy. Key challenges and potential solutions to help increase the potential of Naga women in economic development have been provided by the author.

Chompa (2022) in 'Understanding of women empowerment and socio-economic development: a conceptual analysis' analysed the conceptual framework of women empowerment and socio-economic development, and has analysed the relationship between the two.

Apem (2010) in 'The status of educated working women among the Tangkhuls: A sociological study' studied the effect of women's education and employment, and the changes that are taking place in the traditional social structure through it. Its effect on power relations within the family has also been studied.

Objectives

- 1) To find out the role of women in economic development.
- 2) To analyse the role of Tangkhul women in sustaining the household/the community.
- 3) To highlight various employment opportunities taken up by Tangkhul women.

3. Methodology

This study solely depends on secondary literature. It is based on both qualitative and quantitative methods of social science research. The data for this study was collected from secondary sources including published and unpublished works of various sociologists, scholars, anthropologists, academicians, etc. In this respect, relevant reports, literatures, journals, books, theses have been extensively used. Various sources like Google, Shodhganga, Academia, ResearchGate, etc have been gone through. Exploratory and descriptive research designs have been used. It is completely secondary in nature.

Women's Role in the Global Economy

Women play a significant role in both domestic and economic aspects of socio-economic development. Their status in society has been crucial in various civilizations throughout history. Women have not only influenced their families but also made important contributions to society. Significant portion of the global labour force comprises of women. Women account for more than a third of the global labour force. Women have been shifting away from agriculture and moving into industry and service, particularly the latter, which currently employs more than half of all female workers in several nations. Women constitute 47.7 per cent of the global workforce (Women in the workforce statistics, 2022). The overall productivity will increase tremendously with more economic efficiency and developmental outcomes, if the skills and talents of women are fully recognized.

A key source of inequality between women and men stems from the way they are expected to spend their time. Berniell and Sánchez-Páramo (2011) conducted a study of time use for the World Development Report 2012, using data for 23 countries from the Multinational Use Study, and 12 countries that they added to make the data set more representatives of poor countries. A clear, unsurprising pattern emerges: at all level of incomes, women do the majority of housework and care and, correspondingly, spend less time in market work. The difference ranges from 30 percent more time spent on housework by women than men in Cambodia to six times more in Guinea, and from 70 percent more time for child care in Sweden to ten times more in Iraq.

These differences have an impact on women's ability to participate in market work, be fully engaged in their career, etc. This is one reason why women in developing countries are more likely to be involved in informal work (such as running a small business) that may not be the most productive use of their time. For example, they may run a shop from their house in order to be able to mind the children at the same time, instead of taking on productive employment. This reduces the chance that they have an autonomous income, which has clear implications for their bargaining power within the household.

Women's participation in the economy is being influenced by various factors. While discrimination and built-in prejudice against women in the workplace have decreased in most parts of the world, many economic, social, and cultural

factors and attitudes continue to disadvantage women in the workplace, limiting their contribution unnecessarily and, in many cases, unfairly.

Ghosh (2004) pointed out that since employment in the formal sector is based on the 'male bread winner' model that does not give adequate space or freedom to women, there is over-representation of women in the informal sector. There are constraints upon women's time and freedom to choose - which are imposed by society rather than self-created.

Women make essential contributions to the agricultural and rural economies in all developing countries. Their roles vary considerably between and within regions and are changing rapidly in many parts of the world, where economic and social forces are transforming the agricultural sector. Rural women often manage complex households and pursue multiple livelihood strategies. Their activities typically include producing agricultural crops, tending animals, processing and preparing food, working for wages in agricultural or other rural enterprises, collecting fuel and water, engaging in trade and marketing, caring for family members and maintaining their homes. Many of these activities are not defined as "economically active employment" in national accounts but they are essential to the wellbeing of rural households.

According to the World Bank Europe and Central Asia Chief Economist Asli, the global wealth has immensely benefitted from the women's role in economic development, it increases productivity and brings transformative change in the society; thus, the World Group aims to reduce the obstacles that hinders women towards a progressive economic growth at all levels (The World Bank, 2022).

Indian Women in Economic Development

Women face the challenge of balancing multiple responsibilities, including household chores, child-rearing, and earning income. In India, many women are financially dependent on their male family members, such as fathers, brothers, or husbands. Applying the term status in the Indian context, women, especially from the lower strata of society, despite the deprivations of social privileges, took part in home economy, right from the beginning. Though earning for the family was a joint venture both for men and women as hard economic necessity compelled those women to work for wages in factories, construction site, and agricultural fields and as domestic helps, yet participation of women in such manual labour was not socially recognized as a sign of economic independence. Rather, it was a low status in the lower strata of society. Meanwhile, women from the higher strata were confined within their own homes. Gradually, the process of exclusion of women from manual work has itself become a symbol of higher social status.

In India, women have played a significant role in rural development, particularly in agriculture and allied activities. Women are actively involved in agricultural activities such as crop production, livestock rearing, and fisheries, among others, contributing significantly to the country's food security and rural economy (Joshi & Srivastava, 2020). Indian women, despite constituting 48% of the population,

contribute only 18% to the gross domestic product (GDP), found a study by the National Family Health Survey.

Rural women have many roles, and they have responsibilities and knowledge that differ from those of men. As farmers, they plant, weed and harvest food crops and tend livestock. As caretakers, they look after children and relatives, prepare meals and manage the home. Many women earn extra income by working as wage labourers, producing and selling vegetables, or engaging in small-scale trading and enterprises.

Indian rural women's unpaid work, particularly in poor households, often includes collecting wood and water. Women from indigenous and grassroots communities are often also custodians of traditional knowledge, which is key for their communities' livelihoods, resilience and culture. Yet, women in rural areas face constraints in engaging in economic activities because of gender-based discrimination and social norms, disproportionate involvement in unpaid work, and unequal access to education, healthcare, property, and financial and other services.

Tangkhul NAGA Women & The Economy

Zehol says that like all other Naga groups, the Tangkhuls are patrilineal and hence the male holds for all practical purposes a more decisive position in the society. Even then, in the context of the family, like the father, the mother plays an equally important role (Zehol, 1998). Horam maintains a balanced view in this issue (Horam, 1977):

'The mother plays the main role in running the households. Indeed, the position of women in the Naga society is far from being inferior. The majority of the domestic affairs are in her hands... All her life a woman enjoys considerable freedom. She participates freely on singing and dancing during festivals and entertains the guests. She is never made to feel that she belongs to the weaker sex. Most marriages are love marriages. A girl is free to choose her life partner and rarely is any pressure brought upon her in this matter. The wife is consulted by her husband in all domestic and family affairs. She helps in making decisions, performs domestic duties and shares household responsibilities with him.'

However, their position in society is still a concern and requires attention. In Tangkhul society, women have been emerging from their traditional roles, sometimes pushed by economic necessity and sometimes pulled by the will to make their mark on society in their new roles. The contribution of Tangkhul women's income in relation to household establishment has seen to be more associated with the family's everyday needs which highly indicate their productive role towards society at large.

Tangkhul women participate significantly in small business ventures. The main motives for establishing own business include quest for independence, need to get higher income and the spirit of entrepreneurship. Women are also more often motivated by the threat of unemployment and the desire to prove their ability to manage successfully not only their households but also their firms. In earlier days the entrepreneurial potential of women was confined mainly to

traditional areas like handicrafts and food processing, in which they had a talent of their own. Moreover, the work in these areas could be conveniently carried forward along with their domestic duties.

Tangkhul women weave a variety of cloths extensively. They make varieties of shawls for both men and women. Weaving being an indoor activity could be carried out all through the year. Usually, a girl starts learning the art of weaving from a young age of four or five years and by the time she becomes a teenager she develops the expertise in the art and is in a position to meet her needs and supplement the family income by selling the cloths she has made. In recent years there have been some improvements in the techniques of weaving which has made the process of making easier and faster. In terms of quality the new technique has not been able to prove superior to the old method of loin loom. People still prefer the cloth made from the loin loom which is still costlier than the cloths made using the new technique (K.H. Apem, 2010).

Like any other tribal society, the people of Ukhrul district also depend on land, forest and forest products as its main source of economy. Agriculture is fundamental to the sustenance of Tangkhul community, providing food security, economic stability and cultural identity. Agriculture is the main source of occupation, forest products like timber, fire woods etc. also serve as a means of additional income. Most of the houses in Ukhrul district have some backyard and they raise a kitchen garden. Gradually, this kitchen garden extends to the field which again merges with the forest. The passing down of traditional agricultural knowledge through generations helps maintain cultural heritage. Elders teach younger members about local farming techniques, plant uses, and seasonal cycles, ensuring that this wisdom is preserved.

Tangkhul women are involved in traditional occupations and subsistence activities in agriculture, livestock and others. They play key roles within their communities as custodians and transmitters of traditional knowledge, which is vital for the existence and integrity of their peoples, and indispensable to their livelihoods and resilience. With increasing livelihood insecurity, Tangkhul women increasingly seek employment in the informal economy. They are the primary caregivers to the families and key to ensuring food and nutrition security at the household level. Their works contribute to the overall economic output of the household through non-market activities. Tangkhul women are engaged in many agrarian activities depending upon the socio-economic condition of their family. They are engaged as paid or unpaid labourers on other farms and agricultural enterprises: and as unpaid workers on family farms on their own account.

Table 1: Workers of Ukhrul District by Gender, 2011
Census (in %)

Categories	Male	Female
Cultivator	48.01	51.99
Agricultural Labourer	47.66	52.34
Household Industry	39.05	60.95
Other Workers	66.12	33.88
All Workers	52.92	47.08

Source: Office of the Registrar General of India

From the data given above (Table:1), it is evident that majority of the Tangkhul women in Ukhrul district are still engaged in agricultural activities. The percentages of female in 'cultivator' and 'agricultural labour' are more than the percentage of male in 'cultivator' and 'agricultural labour'.

Agriculture still plays a dominant role as a source of basic subsistence in the villages but lost its traditional importance as a source of prestige and economic wealth. New source of wealth like government jobs, commercial trading and education become associated with status and prestige.

Many Tangkhul women have taken up jobs, including both government and private sector, outside agriculture. In a research study conducted by K.H. Apem (2010) relating the status of educated working women among the Tangkhuls, a considerable amount of the women pursued such jobs since additional earnings is required in their homes. Out of the women who faced objection from their husband, half of them said that their husbands object because they earned sufficient, another half of them said that because they worked, they had no time for him and for the family.

Self Help Groups (SHGs) in Ukhrul District

Despite impressive performance of the earlier poverty alleviation schemes, still there is large poor population. The levels of rural poverty still remain a cause for concern and it is in this context that self-help group movement occupies a significant agenda in the poverty reduction strategy for millions of poor.

In Ukhrul district, women have played a crucial role in rural development through their participation in self-help groups (SHGs). SHGs are community-based organizations that provide women with access to credit, training, and other resources to enhance their economic and social empowerment (Prasad, 2019).

SHG comprises of 10-20 members who have common objectives. It is small but a very powerful change agent. SHGs facilitate economic empowerment by enabling women to pool their resources and savings. It has allowed members to contribute small amounts of money regularly, which can then be loaned out at interest to members in need. By participating in SHGs, Tangkhul women gain financial independence and the ability to invest in income generating activities.

The existence of SHG has brought many changes in the lives of the womenfolk of Tangkhul society. Womenfolk are now more confident, united, and efficient in household management, cooperative etc. and they have developed marketing ideas. Regular meetings conducted in member's house on rotation compel them to clean the house and maintain personal hygiene, which ultimately lead to forming a habit. It is expected of every member to lead and pray in the meetings, thus fear of public speaking is addressed and leadership qualities are learned, besides being more involved spiritually (V.S. Khathing, 2008).

Womenfolk also pointed out the fact that their learned and forgotten writing skills have been revived through SHGs. Now, their handwritings have also improved and even the

old (above sixty years old) can pronounce the Self-Help Group, saving etc. Constant presence of the partner NGOs in the field and their facilitation have helped the community to move along the path of development. The younger generations have formed themselves into SHGs and have started saving on their own, reflecting the feasibility of the next generation (Ibid).

AVA Market in Ukhrul District of Manipur

Ava market (Zaoranao Shinshim) provides women with a platform to engage in trade and entrepreneurship. Here, women sell a variety of locally foraged herbs, wild edibles, and agricultural produce, thereby enhancing their economic

independence. Income is being generated through the daily operations of the market, thereby contributing to the overall economic stability of the family and the community at large. By participating in this marketplace, women gain financial autonomy and a sense of agency within their households and society.

Ava market serves as a pivotal hub for women's economic activities and plays a significant role in local economy. By facilitating women's entrepreneurship, sustaining indigenous food systems, and preserving cultural practices, the market plays an essential role in enhancing community resilience and promoting gender equality.



Figure: Ava market (Source: EastMojo)

4. Findings of the Study

Important findings are listed as under:

- Economic backwardness is one crucial finding. Lack of access to capital, skills, education and training, market, and technology amongst most of the rural women makes it difficult to create value addition.
- Lack of access to production inputs, business premises, networking.
- Lack of access to business training especially geared towards the specific needs of women entrepreneurs.
- Consumption pattern, education and involvement of women in decision making have greatly improved.
- Through this study, it has been observed that women have high potential for development and sustainability of rural economy.

5. Conclusion

Tangkhum women are pivotal to the economic development of their community. As workers, entrepreneurs and custodians of traditional knowledge, their contributions are unique. Their contributions reflect not only their resilience but also highlight the need for greater recognition and support for women's roles in traditional economies.

Addressing this gap could lead to more effective development strategies that empower women and foster sustainable economic growth, within the Tangkhum Naga society.

To empower women, we need changes in society through rearrangement of power, expansion of freedom of choice and action in all spheres, such as economic, political, social, cultural and personal. Women's empowerment and economic development are closely interrelated. From this study, we can say that, women's empowerment is being brought about through development itself, empowering women will bring changes in decision making, which will have a direct impact on development.

It is observed that Tangkhum women are silent partners in family businesses or farming. Women allocate an important part of their time to domestic and farm work. However, their efforts are not remunerated. Illiteracy, endorsement of traditional gender-based roles and a culture of obedience have contributed to the invisibility of rural women in developing countries. Women's economic participation and empowerment are fundamental to strengthening their rights and enable them to have control over their lives and exert influence in society.

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