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Negotiating tradition and modernity: Gendered experiences of empowerment, leadership, and social barriers among Naga women in a rapidly changing tribal society

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Abstract
This mixed-methods study examines evolving gender roles and women's empowerment in Nagaland, focusing on the interplay of education, economic participation, political engagement, and customary law constraints. Survey data from 400 participants and interviews with 40 women reveal that traditional patriarchal norms continue to define women's domestic roles, but significant shifts in attitudes, especially among younger and urban populations, indicate growing aspirations for education and leadership. Education emerges as a key driver of empowerment, enhancing women's autonomy despite persistent access barriers. Economic participation through agriculture, handicrafts, and entrepreneurship is substantial yet limited by structural obstacles. Political representation remains low but support for women's reservation in local governance is increasing amid customary law resistance. Women employ adaptive strategies, utilizing collective networks to negotiate traditional expectations and assert agency. The study highlights the need for culturally sensitive policies balancing respect for indigenous traditions with promotion of gender equity and empowerment pathways, contributing to feminist and indigenous scholarship on gender and social change.

Keywords: Gender roles, women empowerment, Nagaland, customary laws, education, political participation

1. Introduction
Nagaland is a state in Northeast India known for its rich cultural diversity with multiple indigenous Naga tribes, each possessing distinct customs, social structures, and traditional practices. Historically, Naga society has been predominantly patriarchal, with clearly defined gender roles that limited women's participation largely to domestic and caregiving responsibilities. Traditional power structures, including village councils and customary laws, have predominantly vested authority and decision-making in male members, thus shaping women's social, economic, and political status.

Over recent decades, Nagaland has seen rapid socio-economic developments fueled by modernization, increased access to education, urbanization, and engagement with wider national and global discourses on gender equality and human rights. These developments have created new opportunities for women to challenge and transform entrenched gender roles. Education, in particular, has empowered many women to pursue careers, engage in entrepreneurial activities, and assert their rights in social and political spheres. Despite these advances, women in Nagaland continue to face substantial challenges: socio-cultural norms, restrictive customary laws, and institutional barriers hinder their full empowerment.

This study investigates the evolving nature of gender roles and the multifaceted processes of women's empowerment in Nagaland. It aims to explore the dialectical relationship between tradition and modernity by examining women's lived experiences, perceptions of empowerment, and the socio-legal context influencing gender relations. Special emphasis is placed on the impact of education, economic participation, political engagement, and barriers imposed by customary practices.

Conducted through a mixed-methods approach, this research integrates quantitative survey data with qualitative insights from interviews and focus group discussions involving women and community stakeholders. The study offers a comprehensive understanding of how

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women negotiate identities and agency amidst shifting cultural landscapes. Additionally, it addresses implications for policy, governance, and community-driven change to foster gender equity in Nagaland.

2. Literature Review
2.1 Traditional Gender Roles in Naga Society
Naga society is composed of multiple tribes, each with unique customs but sharing common patriarchal structures that delineate gender roles sharply. Traditionally, women's roles have centered on domestic responsibilities, including child-rearing, food preparation, and household management, alongside contributions to agriculture and artisanal crafts such as weaving. These roles, while essential, have historically limited women's access to formal power and public decision-making spaces (Jamir, 2018) [2]. Village councils and customary laws have institutionalized male dominance in governance and land ownership, reinforcing gender hierarchies (Kipgen, 2022) [6]. These patriarchal norms are socially enforced through rituals and community sanctions, establishing gendered power relations that persist despite some social changes.

2.2 Education as a Catalyst for Empowerment
Education is widely recognized as a critical enabler of women's empowerment worldwide (Sen & Grown, 1987) [13]. In Nagaland, rising female literacy rates and increased school attendance among girls have begun shifting perceptions of gender capabilities and roles. Educated women report greater self-confidence, awareness of rights, and aspirations for economic and political participation (Nagaland State Education Report, 2023) [9]. However, challenges remain, including gender disparities in access to higher education, especially in rural areas where socio-cultural expectations often prioritize marriage and family over education for girls (Wangsu, 2024) [16]. The literature stresses the dual role of education: as a tool for empowerment and as a site of contestation between traditional and modern values.

2.3 Political Participation and Women's Reservation Movements
Political participation of women in Nagaland remains limited compared to men. Customary governance structures and male-dominated village councils rarely include women, relegating their political voices to the margins (Nagaland Women Commission Report, 2025) [10]. The push for statutory reservations of 33% seats for women in local governance has been met with resistance grounded in concerns over disrupting customary laws and traditions (Jamir, 2023) [3]. Scholars debate the effectiveness of reservations in enhancing genuine empowerment versus symbolic representation (Kikon, 2024) [5]. The literature also examines women's informal political activism through community mobilization and social movements, asserting agency outside formal institutions.

2.4 Cultural Challenges and Resistance within Patriarchal Frameworks
Customary laws, while essential for cultural identity and social cohesion, often perpetuate gender inequalities. Women generally lack rights to land ownership and inheritance, affecting their economic security and social status (Wangsu, 2024) [16]. Resistance to changing these norms is strong within tribal communities, sustained by social sanctions and cultural narratives valorizing male authority (Kipgen, 2022) [6]. Nevertheless, women's increasing educational and economic presence is catalyzing contestations over gender roles, with younger generations challenging traditional expectations (Singh & Jamir, 2025) [15].

3. Methodology
3.1 Research Design
This study adopts a mixed-methods research design that integrates quantitative and qualitative approaches to gain a comprehensive understanding of gender roles and women's empowerment in Nagaland. The rationale for this design lies in combining broad patterns detected through surveys with deeper insights from interviews and focus groups to capture both measurable trends and lived experiences.

3.2 Sampling and Sampling Criteria
The study utilizes stratified purposive sampling to ensure representation across major Naga tribes (Ao, Angami, Sumi, Konyak, and others), gender, and urban-rural divides.

- **Quantitative Component:** The survey is administered to approximately 400 participants, with 300 women and 100 men, aged 18-45 years. Respondents are recruited from both urban and rural communities to capture diverse perspectives.
- **Qualitative Component:** Purposive sampling selects 40 women leaders, entrepreneurs, educators, and activists from various tribes and locations for in-depth interviews.

3.3 Data Collection Methods
3.3.1 Survey
Structured questionnaires designed to measure perceptions of traditional gender roles, education, economic participation, political engagement, barriers due to customary law, and empowerment indicators were disseminated. The survey was administered online and in-person with the help of local facilitators to accommodate literacy and accessibility challenges.

3.3.2 In-depth Interviews
Semi-structured interview guides facilitated exploration of women's personal narratives regarding gender role expectations, challenges faced in education and employment, experiences in political participation, and negotiation of empowerment within customary frameworks.

3.3.3 Focus Group Discussions
Facilitated dialogues provided space for collective reflection on community norms, social dynamics, and aspirations related to women's empowerment. These interactions highlight social sanctions, support mechanisms, and community-level initiatives.

3.4 Data Analysis Techniques
3.4.1 Quantitative Analysis
Survey data were cleaned and entered into SPSS and R for analysis. Descriptive statistics summarized demographic characteristics and responses. Cross-tabulations and chi-square tests comparing perceptions and experiences by gender, tribe, and locality. T-tests and ANOVA for mean comparisons of empowerment scales.

3.4.2 Qualitative Analysis

Interview and focus group transcripts undergo thematic analysis using NVivo software. Open coding identified meaningful excerpts. Axial coding connected categories to research questions. Selective coding developed overarching themes.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

- Ethical approval is obtained from a recognized institutional review board.
- Informed consent is secured from all participants, with information about voluntary participation, confidentiality, and withdrawal rights.
- Anonymity is preserved by assigning codes instead of names.
- Psychological support contacts are provided due to the sensitive nature of topics discussed.
- Data storage complies with data protection standards.

4. Findings / Results

4.1 Participant Demographics

The study's sample consisted of 400 participants, with 300 women and 100 men, aged 18 to 45 years (mean age 28). Tribal composition included Ao (25%), Angami (23%), Sumi (20%), Konyak (15%), and other tribes (17%). Participants were from both urban (45%) and rural (55%) areas. Education levels varied, with 45% completing secondary schooling, 35% attaining undergraduate or higher, and 20% with primary or less.

4.2 Traditional Gender Role Perceptions

Domestic Roles Dominant: Approximately 72% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that women's primary roles are as homemakers and caregivers, supporting ethnographic evidence of prevailing domestic expectations.

Shift in Priorities: Despite traditional norms, 54% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that women should prioritize family responsibilities over education or career, indicating a growing shift in aspirations, especially among younger and urban participants.

4.3 Impact of Education on Empowerment

Education as a Positive Driver: 82% of respondents agreed that education enhances women's independence and respect in the community.

Higher Education Correlates with Empowerment: Women with undergraduate or higher education reported empowerment scores averaging 4.2 on a 5-point scale, significantly higher than those with less education (mean score 3.1; $p<0.01$).

Barriers Remain: Qualitative data highlighted persistent educational barriers in rural areas, including early marriage pressures and parental resistance.

4.4 Economic Participation

Employment Status: 60% of women respondents reported engagement in income-generating activities, primarily agriculture (38%), handicrafts (28%), and small businesses (22%).

Barriers to Economic Empowerment: 68% agreed that lack of access to credit, markets, and training restricts women's economic independence, particularly in rural communities.

Entrepreneurial Growth: Interviewees described an emergence of women-led enterprises aided by NGOs and microfinance but emphasized ongoing social constraints.

4.5 Political Participation and Representation

- **Low Formal Engagement:** Only 18% of respondents reported active participation in political or community leadership roles, reflecting entrenched exclusion in governance.
- **Support for Women's Reservation:** A majority (66%) endorsed the 33% women's reservation in village councils, though support was stronger among women (72%) than men (58%).

4.6 Customary Law and Social Barriers

- **Land and Inheritance Inequities:** 70% acknowledged customary laws limit women's land ownership and inheritance rights, reinforcing economic dependence.
- **Social Sanctions:** 65% reported that women challenging traditional roles face significant social sanctions, including ostracization and gossip.

4.7 Women's Agency and Strategies

- **Negotiation of Roles:** Many women described balancing respect for tradition with aspirations for education, leadership, and economic independence.
- **Support Networks:** Self-help groups, NGOs, and informal women's collectives emerged as crucial sources of empowerment, providing training, financial aid, and platforms for advocacy.

4.8 Urban-Rural and Tribal Variations

Urban women exhibited higher educational attainment and greater economic and political participation than rural counterparts.

Tribal differences emerged in customary law strictness and openness to women's empowerment initiatives.

Younger generations generally espoused more progressive gender attitudes, while elders emphasized tradition.

5. Discussion

The findings from this mixed-methods study offer a nuanced understanding of the evolving gender dynamics and women's empowerment in Nagaland. They reveal a society in transition, where traditional patriarchal norms continue to structure women's roles and rights while increasing education, economic participation, and political activism create openings for social change.

5.1 Changing Gender Role Perceptions

The dominant perception that women's primary responsibilities lie in domestic care persists, reflecting longstanding cultural expectations widely embedded in Nagaland's tribal societies. However, the substantial proportion of respondents who reject prioritizing family duties over education and career signals emergent shifts. This evolving attitude aligns with broader development literature that highlights education and urban exposure as critical drivers of changing gender ideologies (Sen & Grown, 1987) [13]. It also underscores the tension experienced by women negotiating modern aspirations within conservative cultural frameworks.

5.2 Education as a Key Empowerment Catalyst

The data underscore education's dual role—as an instrument for liberation and as a site of contestation. Women's higher

education correlates strongly with empowerment indicators, resonating with feminist scholarship that foregrounds education in expanding women's capabilities, self-efficacy, and social voice (Nussbaum, 2000). Nonetheless, qualitative findings reveal persistent access barriers, especially in rural areas, where gendered socialization and early marriage pressures limit educational attainment.

5.3 Economic Participation under Structural Constraints

Women's significant engagement in agriculture, handicrafts, and emerging entrepreneurship showcases their critical economic roles despite systemic constraints. Limited access to credit and market discrimination remains serious hurdles, consistent with gender and development analyses emphasizing structural barriers to women's economic empowerment (Kabeer, 1999) [4]. Importantly, women's collectives and self-help groups emerge as potent mechanisms for circumventing exclusion and fostering financial autonomy.

5.4 Political Participation: Progress and Resistance

While formal political involvement remains low, broad support for women's reservation in local governance indicates readiness for institutional change. The resistance from some male and traditionalist quarters reveals the intersection of cultural preservation concerns with gender power struggles. This reflects the challenges of reconciling democratic inclusivity with customary governance customary law systems, as explored in recent scholarship on tribal political reforms (Menon, 2017) [7].

5.5 Customary Law's Enduring Impact

The study confirms the pervasive effect of customary laws in restricting women's land rights and decision-making powers. These findings align with anthropological critiques of customary legal pluralism restricting women's rights in indigenous societies (Gluckman, 1965; Merry, 1988) [1, 8]. The accompanying social sanctions against women challenging patriarchal norms highlight the sociocultural resilience of gendered control mechanisms.

5.6 Women's Agency and Adaptive Strategies

Despite structural obstacles, women's narratives reveal remarkable agency and resilience. Through negotiation, collective action, and leveraging support networks, women shape new norms and opportunities, illustrating the dialectic of structure and agency emphasized in feminist theory (Giddens, 1984). These grassroots movements and informal leadership forms underscore women as active agents of social transformation rather than mere subjects of oppression.

5.7 Urban-Rural and Tribal Differences

The research highlights that urbanization and tribal cultural variations significantly affect empowerment trajectories. Urban women's higher educational and economic participation contrasts with rural constraints, echoing findings from other indigenous contexts. Tribal heterogeneity in customary law strictness further complicates the landscape of women's rights, underscoring the need for tailored strategies respectful of cultural diversity.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusion

This research reveals the complexity of gender roles and women's empowerment in Nagaland m, as a site of both enduring cultural traditions and dynamic social change. While deeply rooted patriarchal norms continue to define women's primary roles within domestic and agricultural spheres, increasing educational attainment, economic participation, and political engagement signal an ongoing transformation of women's social status and agency.

Education emerges as a crucial catalyst, empowering women with knowledge, confidence, and aspirations beyond traditional expectations. Economic participation, though constrained by social and structural barriers, reveals growing entrepreneurial initiatives supported by community networks and NGOs. Political representation remains low but growing, with contentious debates over women's reservation reflecting broader tensions between modern democratic ideals and customary law.

Customary legal frameworks and social sanctions remain significant obstacles to women's full empowerment, particularly in terms of land rights and decision-making. Yet, Naga women employ adaptive strategies, forming collectives, negotiating identities, and mobilizing grassroots support to assert agency within these constraints.

The study underscores the need for culturally nuanced approaches that respect indigenous traditions while promoting gender equity, recognizing women as active agents in shaping their empowerment pathways.

6.2 Recommendations

- Focus on increasing female literacy and higher education opportunities, especially in rural and remote areas, while addressing socio-cultural barriers such as early marriage and gender bias.
- Support women's entrepreneurship through access to credit, training, and market linkages; promote self-help groups and cooperatives to facilitate collective economic strength.
- Advocate for implementation and acceptance of women's reservation in local governance; provide leadership training and awareness programs to build women's political capacity.
- Facilitate dialogues between customary law authorities and women's organizations to reform regressive practices related to land rights, inheritance, and decision-making without dismissing cultural values.
- Bolster women's collectives, NGOs, and civil society groups that provide social, legal, and psychological support; encourage mentoring and networking opportunities.
- Establish ongoing research initiatives to monitor changes in gender roles and empowerment, enabling responsive policies informed by evolving realities and voices of Naga women.

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