



## PARTICIPATION IN TRADITIONAL LOCAL GOVERNANCE: WOMEN'S PERCEPTIONS AND RESPONSES IN UKHRUL DISTRICT, MANIPUR, INDIA

### Social Science

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### ABSTRACT

The article draws on research exploration upon women's perceptions on their participation in traditional local governance and individuals' perceptual responses in becoming a village council member. In India the provision laid down under the 73rd and 74th constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 furthers women's participation in local governance to ensure developing gender sensitive actions towards sustainable society. The qualitative cross-sectional nature of exploration with non-probability - convenience sampling method was adopted to unearth the study objectives in the Tangkhul Naga villages of Ukhrul, Manipur. A total of 50 respondents were interviewed using semi-structured interview schedule, supplemented by Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGD). The findings revealed, the Tangkhul women hold the beliefs that their participation in local governance is significant in creating gender sensitive policies and in bringing overall development. Albeit, having positive perceptions; negative perceptual response inferred that women are still reluctant to come out from the traditional space.

### KEYWORDS

Women's participation, Traditional local governance, Perception, Village council.

### INTRODUCTION

The development of a society or a nation depends on the availability and potential maximum utilization of resources. The most powerful and valuable resources of a society or a nation is its human resource. Any societies which can transform its maximum population into human resource run at the higher developmental path. However the issue lies within the imbalance utilization of maximum population as human resource. Albeit, women compose half or more of the nation's total population, their opportunities and roles in contributing towards national development are often deprived. Therefore, the concept like women empowerment and development and women emancipation thus emerged (Kalita & Baruah, 2015).

The concept of women's participation in governance is not of recent modern origin. Plato, Socrates the world renowned Greek philosophers, in *The Republic* stated as "part of the natural relation of the sexes" during the fourth century BC. Plato concluded that no any class, neither ethnicity nor gender must determined intelligence and ethics that the same must adhere to every one without any restrictions or limited to any particular group. History around the world witnessed mankind's arduous endeavor for a better world. Mention can be made amongst many The French revolution and several movements and revolutions that addressed the issues of liberty, equality, freedom from the colonial domination, abolition of slavery, emancipation of working class, etc. However, on the other hand such movements and revolutions least concerned about the voice of women and neglected their issues and quest for ameliorating women's condition in the society. Two years prior to The French Revolution, a proposal for women to be granted legal rights and opportunity for election to governing bodies was raised by Condorcet who authored the *progress of the Human Mind*. Later, during The French Revolution in 1789, a self educated daughter of butcher named Olympe de Gouges initiated a move inclusive of women form all classes and ranks. They resolutely endorsed an agenda known as women's reform agenda to the national assembly in October 1789. She refuted that principle of natural equality was underrated in the French Declaration on the Rights of Man on the basis of gender and race. Her audacity on the issues of women rights and women's political association could but outlawed by the then French ostensibly democratic Committee on public Security. She was beheaded in the year 1793. Another significant account was the work of Mary Wollstonecraft on women's rights when she published her book titled *"Vindication of the Rights of Women"* in 1792, which sent a great shock all over the world, inked in the history of the emergence of feminism movement (Kumari, 2006. pp. 1-26, 172-178). Women's participation in governance was predominantly deliberated during the first wave of feminist movement in 19<sup>th</sup> century. Different feminist schools of thoughts attempt to explain the nature of subordination and suppression of women. Ray expressed how Men took the reign of power and women were assigned the role of wife, mother and associated them with religion and tradition. Any policy or

legislation codifies the essence of patriarchal values which relegate women as the second class citizen or legal minor (Ray & Ray, 2008).

Thus, equal participation of women in local governance is crucial and important for developing gender sensitive policies and programs formulation towards ensuring sustainable development. It is a matter of distributive justice ensuring equal citizenship and promotes equal rights and opportunities to women. Equal participation and representation of women strengthens the 'democratic political system', 'participatory democracy', 'good governance' and peace and tranquility in the state. However, women are not well represented in local governance and involve in decision making which arises the questions of validity and reliability of the process of decision making. They encounter cultural barriers and complicate institutional machineries which are often driven by patriarchal ideology. Efforts have been exerted to ensure equal participation or in simple words to promote free and fair involvement in decision making have resulted in promulgation of several laws and provisions internationally and nationally (Ebeku, 2005; Liyanage, 2018).

In the cycle of developmental wave of women empowerment around the world, India had to wake from its long slumber indifference gesture towards women's issues. The Constitution of India guarantees all citizen equality in all the spheres of social, economic, political, etc. life. Special measures must be taken to empower and uplift the condition and status of women in India. The year of 1990s brought about drastically changes and development in many aspects for the nation. Mention can be made one amongst many of those, the Constitutional Amendment of 1992 which is also known as the 73<sup>rd</sup> & 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional (Amendment) Act dawn a new ray of hope for women in politics (Chakrabarty et.al, 2004; Nandita, 2013). Under this provision one-third of the seats in municipality should be reserved exclusively for women. The creation of Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) or rather can be termed as decentralization of power provides several opportunities for women's participation in governance.

The north eastern region constitutes about 8% of India's size with approximately 40 million of the total population of India (Census 2011). It is a home for tribal as being one of the highest regions of concentration of tribal. During the British era, Tribal areas were classified as "excluded" and "Partially Excluded" under the Government of India Act 1935. However, the Act of 1935 did not grant local self governance political autonomy. After the independence in 1952 this was replaced by what is known as sixth schedule with the intention to provide protection of tribal areas and interest by allowing local self governance through constitutional institutions at district or regional level. These institutions are responsible for protecting tribal culture and customs and to carry out developmental tasks.

The Tangkhul Naga tribe is one of the tribes from North Eastern parts

of India having a unique way of governance system. The whole system or procedure or structures is fully governed by the dictate of customary law that is systematically mechanized in line with patrilineal characteristics. Customarily, the form of governance is monarchy or headman-ship/chieftainship, that the hereditary headman is the permanent head of the village council in nature. Meanwhile, the unconventional form of governance system has been adopted by many villages in order to adapt with the changing contexts. In this system, the chairman is to be elected as the head of the village council. Normatively the head of the clans are represented in the council as the member. However, in the present day practice any male or head of the household deem eligible can become member representative in the village council. The practice and pattern of selection of member representatives from the clans through the process of nomination is the same as in both the two different system. The size of member composition of the village council depends on the number and size of the clans whereby the size of the clans is determined by the number of sub-clans which is composed by the number of household belonging to a particular clan (Yaongam & Elizabeth, 2017).

### Overview of Literature

The existing literature accentuated increasing attention on women and governance from researchers and policy makers as a "highly significant issues on grounds of both equity and improving the performance of governance" (Minoletti, 2014). Several studies on women and governance are found in global, national and local contexts.

Voluminous study relating to women and governance dominated significant space in the world of research based literature. Women's participation and representation in governance was examined by many researchers from various perspectives in different countries (Kurebwa, 2014; Panday & Li, 2014; Bawa & Sanyare, 2013; Guo, Zheng & Yang, 2009; Mobido, 1995; Pandey, 1990). The studies in regards to women's political participation: the constraining factors and enabling factors to women's participation have been conducted to understand the factors that affect women's participation in politics (Adesanya, 2014; Minoletti, 2014; Bawa & Sanyare, 2013; Wang & Dai, 2013; True et. al, 2012; Pape, 2008; Howell, 2006; Weinberger & Jutting, 2001; Conway, 2001; Skalnes et. al, n.d.). The issues on women's empowerment and their participation in governance in the globalised context were also discussed in different studies (Rezazadeh, 2011; Gray, Kittilson, & Sandholtz, 2006; Fernando, 1997). Significant studies embarked in relating to the present research context are on the attitude and perception of people towards gender roles and women's participation in governance (Alim, 2009; Bowen, Wu, Hwang, & Scherer, 2007).

The availability of several research based literatures on women and governance evidently indicated the fervent attempt to ameliorate the condition of women in India in the political spheres. It is found that the attempt has been made on the issue of women's political representation and in the aspect of policy making (Iyer et. al, 2012; Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004). Also, attempts have been made to highlight the condition of women in local governance, the opportunities and challenges faced by women in politics (Ananthpur, 2007; UN, n.d). Authors like (Nandita, 2013; Kaul & Sahni, 2009; Chakrabarty et. al, 2004; Bhan &

Raj, 2001; Roy, 1999; Forbes, 1998) examined the participation of women in decision making process from different perspectives. Several attempts have been made on the issue of Empowerment of women through political participation in India (Singh, 2015; Pankaj & Tankha, 2010).

Many research based studies have been done on the issues of women and the customary practices; its implication on the life of women, status of women and their roles, etc (Zimik, 2015, 2014; Buongpui, 2013; Das, 2013; Kamei, 2011; Vitso, 2003). On the other hand several authors have been attempted on the aspects of women empowerment and women's participation in governance to highlight the condition of women and to promote overall development in regards to women in northeast India (Lalchathuanthangi, 2016; Bhattacharya & Roy, 2015; Das, 2015; Yaongam & Elizabeth, 2017; Kalita & Baruah, 2015; Lalnezhovi, 2012).

### AIMS & OBJECTIVES:

The present paper explores the perception of women towards their participation and representation in traditional local governance (TLG). In addition to that attempt has been made to find out their perceptual response in becoming a member in the village council in the Tangkhul Naga community of Ukhrul district, Manipur.

### Methodology:

The study is cross sectional in nature and exploratory in design which adopted multistage sampling procedure to select the town, the block and the villages based on the available literacy rate. Two villages were selected for the study which has least educational status and most educational status from the chosen block and further categorized them as least developed village and most developed village respectively. Population of the study composed of women at the age of 18 years and above. Non-Probability - Convenience sampling method was employed to select respondents from the determined villages. A total of 50 respondents were interviewed using semi-structured interview schedule, of these constituted 25 respondents each from the two selected categorized villages. Free listing was conducted and the analysis was done by using Antropac software. Simple averages, percentages and proportions, were used to interpret the data.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

The existing condition of women's participation and the perceptions of women on their participation in the traditional local governance in contingent upon women's perceptual responses in the Tangkhul Naga Villages of Ukhrul District, Manipur are reflected on the elicited information from individual interviews. While the information elicited through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) are relevantly incorporated within the context. The results of the study are summarized as under.

### Women's Perception towards their participation in Traditional Local Governance (TLG)

Table 1 represents the data of the women's perception and views on women's participation in traditional local governance (TLG). It is important to know about what women believe and how they view of their involvement in decision making to establish contextual cognition about the inclusive governance.

**Table 1. Women's Perception towards their participation in Traditional Local governance**

Perception	Least Developed			Most developed			Total		
	(%)	Average Rank	Salience	(%)	Average Rank	Salience	(%)	Average Rank	Salience
It is a necessary political development	40	1	0.4	68.4	1	0.684	52.3	1.0	0.52
It is imperative for overall development	56	1	0.56	26.3	1	0.263	43.2	1.0	0.43
Responsibilities nurture women to be critical and responsive	28	2.71	0.133	36.8	2	0.211	31.8	2.4	0.17
Educated women have the capacity to govern	36	2.44	0.183	21.1	2.75	0.102	29.5	2.5	0.15
Towards equality of opportunity and gender justice	32	2.75	0.155	26.3	2.8	0.122	29.5	2.8	0.14
Men alone can't run the society efficiently	12	2.67	0.074	15.8	2	0.117	13.6	2.3	0.09
Better decision making	20	3	0.078	21.1	2.75	0.089	20.5	2.9	0.08
Promote gender sensitivity in governance	12	2.33	0.07	15.8	2	0.079	13.6	2.2	0.07
Women can act as complimentary agents	8	2.5	0.04	5.3	3	0.018	6.8	2.7	0.03
Women are the societal backbones	8	2.5	0.047	0	0	0	4.5	2.5	0.03
It is not necessary as women have different roles	4	1	0.04	0	0	0	2.3	1.0	0.02
Women's participation would strengthen traditional governance	4	2	0.02	5.3	2	0.026	4.5	2.0	0.02

Source: Computed

The data shows more than a half (52.3%) of the total respondents believed that women's participation in Traditional Local Governance is necessary to ensure political development and more than maximum of two-third (43.2%) of the overall respondents highly perceived that it is imperative to promote overall development in the society. Nagaraja and Kusugal (2013) have made a similar comment that active participation of women in local government can contribute to overall development of the community. This indicates the actual cognition of women of their situation that they do have high responsibility as men do. It is a collective responsibility to govern to promote overall progress and development of the society. FGDs amongst the male village leaders similarly affirmed to this perception. Similar finding was found in the previous study (see Guo, Zheng & Yang, 2009). The data revealed that less than one-third (31.8%) respondents had the beliefs that, women's multiple responsibilities and roles nurture them to be sensitive and critically responsive. They further stated that there are certain matters best concerned to women and situation best understood by women. These diverse roles and responsibilities help women capable of planning and monitoring activities. Their experiential inputs in governance can contribute to greater successful and meaningful outcomes. In concerning about the capability and ability more than one-fourth (29.5%) of the total respondents argued that many women are educated enough to be able to handle the affairs of the governance. Similar argument was found in the previous study that, in the present context the Tangkhul women are well educated enough to earn and support themselves as much incoherent in the past (see Zimik, 2014). In fact majority of the council members have either without any educational qualification or just as qualified as women in general. Hence, the major differencing factor grounded on gender segregation. In correlation to this more than one fourth (29.5%) respondents have the opinion that equality should be uphold to ensure gender justice. Therefore, equality and justice in governance can be ensured through promoting women's participation in decision making. In another assertion, about one-fifth (20.5%) of the total respondents perceived that women's participation in TLG can results better decision making. They can act as pacifying agents during conflicts in decision making. In times of any conflicts arises women have been playing significant roles in bringing amicable solutions since time

immemorial in the Tangkhul society. Of the total respondents less than one-seventh (13.6%) respondents affirmed that promotion of gender sensitive governance is important because no men alone can run the society effectively. It was observed amongst the Tangkhul society that majority of the household activities are undertaken by women and without women's contribution a home is incomplete. In line with this without women's contribution in governance the management will be ineffective. Thus, 6.8% of the total respondents confirmed that women can act as complementary agent to bridge the intellectual gap of managing the affairs of the governance. As interest and concern varies between men and women in governance (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004). Another 4.5% of the total respondents asserted that women are the backbone of the society. This explains that without taking women's perspectives into consideration society cannot stand alone on the perspectives of men. Women are the soul of the society. In contrary to this, some section of members in the society argued that allowing women in the governance is tantamount to social jettison of the unique customary law and practices which holds the cup of tribal identity. However, yet 4.5% of the respondents contended to this view and conformed to the idea that women's participation in governance would rather strengthen the traditional system of governance. In another revelation, of the total respondents 2.3% respondents do not see the necessity of women's participation, narrating that women have more significant roles to perform within home circle. Further, commented that women involving in decision making roles would exacerbate their already overburdened responsibilities leading to roles confusion and dysfunctional.

**Respondents' willingness to participate in Traditional Local Governance**

Table 2 represents the accumulated data of the respondent's willingness to participate in Traditional Local Governance. The study enquired on their willingness to become a member of the village council to establish the actual facet of women's interest in the governance. Majority of the respondents have the positive perception towards women's participation in decision making body as it has been indicated in the above table 1. However, in an astonishing revelation it is not in coherent to what they actually response towards calling.

**Table 2 Respondents' willingness to participate in TLG**

Response	Least Developed			Most Developed			Total		
	%	Average Rank	Salience	%	Average Rank	Salience	%	Average Rank	Salience
Unwilling	50	1	0.50	59.1	1	0.59	54.5	1	0.55
Willing	18.2	1	0.18	27.3	1	0.27	22.7	1	0.23
Willing But I Am Too Old	9.1	1	0.09	0	0	0	4.5	1	0.05
Willing But No Time	4.5	1	0.05	4.5	1	0.05	4.5	1	0.05
Unwilling And Not My Responsibility	9.1	1	0.09	0	0	0	4.5	1	0.05
Unwilling Due To Lack Of Education	4.5	1	0.05	0	0	0	2.3	1	0.02
Willing But Men Will Not Listen	0	0	0	4.5	1	0.05	2.3	1	0.02

Source: Computed

The data revealed disheartening factual context of the Tangkhul women in governance. Although majority of the respondents advocated active participation of women in decision making body they are not pragmatically ready to participate. Of the overall accounted responses more than a half (54.5%) of the total respondents is unwilling to participate in the TLG. Of which a half (50%) respondents are from the least developed village and comparatively greater number of more than a half (59.1%) respondents are from the most developed village that denied becoming a member of the village council. Out of the entire respondents only two-ninth (22.7%) respondents are willing to take up the responsibility in decision making body. This inclusive of more than one-sixth (18.2%) respondents from the least developed village and respondents of more than two-eight (27.3%) are from the most developed village. The data represents comparatively lesser of just two-ninth (22.7%) respondents who are willing to become a member in village council with that of more than a half (54.5%) respondents who are unwilling to become a member in village council. The data vividly indicated a critical daunting reality towards promoting women's participation in the decision making body. Unless the women section denied involving in a matter concerning them, it is difficult to advocate and sought changes of the existing situation. Progressive change should not be expected from without but it needs to be achieved within through collective efforts. In another case, there are group respondents who are willing to shoulder the responsibilities of the village authority however they are reluctant due to their personal limitations. This can be seen in three main different conditions. In the first case, 4.5% of the respondents associated their limitation with their

age to bear the responsibilities. With the entire 9.1% of such respondents belongs to the least developed village. Similarly in the second case, there are those respondents which make up to 4.5% with 9.1% of respondents from the least developed village positively responded but refused due to time constrains. They stated that their heavy domestic workloads and other socially expected responsibilities limited their mobility and service contribution. Women carry The third condition revealed that the respondents of 4.5% from the most developed village that make up to just 2.3% of the total respondents contended their willingness but reluctant to confirm becoming a member of the village council. The reason being limited them assured men will not listen to their voice. They argued that the mentality of men in general towards women still holds in a very negative way. Men consciously or unconsciously treated inferior or prejudice women especially in the matters relating to decision making power. This advocates the need to improve the mentality of men towards women and endorse in the principle of equality and recognition. On the other hand the analysis reveals that some sections of the respondents are but unwilling to take up the responsibility as a member of the council. They argued that it is not their responsibility to be in the village council. Some refuted that such idea is a mere imitation of the foreign culture therefore it can only degrade the unique culture of the Tangkhul society instead of bringing progressive change and development. The respondents observed that without understanding the real context and situation imposing of foreign ideas pose a serious threat to the existing unique culture. Of the total 9.1% respondents which composed of 4.5% respondents from the least developed village contain to such

ideas. In another case, 4.5% of the total respondents; that composed of 2.3% respondents from the least developed village asserted unwillingness to become a member of the village council. They expressed that their lack of educational qualification discouraged them. This corroborates that a person's educational qualification can boost one's confidence and improves capacity and ability to undertake action. However in contrary the data reveals that the respondents educational status does not have significance influence on the nature of their response to become a member of the village council. Maximum of the respondents from the most developed village acquire better education however, it is accounted with higher percentage of responds for unwilling to become a member in the village council.

## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the exploration on the prevailing political perceptions and perceptual responses of women towards their participation in local governance of the Tangkhul community shed deeper understanding on the condition of women in Local Governance. Although, the Tangkhul women play significant roles in society and claim to have a high social position, their contributions and involvement in decision making process are asymmetrically established to their perceived high social status and maintained positive perceptions towards women in Local governance. The data showed more than a half (52.3%) of the total respondents believed that women's participation in Traditional Local Governance is necessary to ensure political development and more than maximum of two-third (43.2%) of the overall respondents highly perceived that it is imperative to promote overall development. The analysis revealed positive reflection and perceptions in regards to women's participation in local decision making body. However, in an intriguing revelation the data depicted contradictory phenomena in regards to women's representation in village council despite their positive perception. That the maximum of more than half (54.5%) of the entire respondents were not willing to become a member in village council. This has come to the conclusion that women representation could not be possible unless women committed themselves to participation in village assembly or clans meeting. Moreover, it will not come to realization of the orthodoxy of women's participation in decision making and governing body without the collective effort involving both men and women in the society. It thus Lalneihzovi (2012) rightly concluded that the issues appertaining to women's political participation are not the issues to be dealt with by the women alone. However, in trying to bring any change and development we must avoid emulation of foreign system and imposition of alien system without thoroughly comprehending the contextual exigency.

The relevant explanation in regards to low status of women in decision making thus, attributed to tradition, cultural norms and social norms. What was more dismal to learn the fact, that despite knowing the importance of women's participation in decision making, the people in general failed to even pursue in bringing improvement on the condition of women in governance. The rigidity of custom hardens the mentality of people ever. Preserving and protecting of cultural sanctity must continue but in doing so it should not deny the essence of an individual. Change is imperative and must ensure overall development and progress. Strengthening and sustaining of culture and tradition as in system of governance can be achieved only when equality and recognition of women are granted in the society.

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