



Women Empowerment through Women's Leadership from the Perspective of Women's Organisation in Manipur

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Abstract

Women empowerment is a global concern. For this purpose, collective initiatives have been taken at all spheres at global, national, state, and local levels. The state of Manipur also witnesses these initiatives but what stands out is the contribution of Manipuri women. The women of Manipur always come forward when there is a need which can be seen from the 'women's war' of 1904 and 1939. They have collectively fought against drugs and alcohol as 'Nisa Bandis' resulting in the alcohol prohibition act of 1991. And again they came together against the Arm Forces Special Power Act (AFSPA) which was regulated in the state; their struggle resulted in the partial revoke of the act from the valley region of the state. Simultaneously the women have formed organizations for better implementation of the services to their needs. One such organization is Macha Leima, it is a totally women-run organization in Manipur established with the objectives of unifying Manipuri women without any discrimination and to work for their emancipation in society. The author through an empirical study of the Macha Leima organization attempts to understand the contribution of the organization to women's empowerment in Imphal, Manipur.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Women Organization, Macha Leima Organization.

Introduction

Women empowerment is a global concern. The importance of gender equality and empowerment of women is recognized globally as a key element to achieving progress in all areas. It has been a central point of the United Nation's Millennium Development Goal in its third goal 'to promote gender equality and empower women' and Sustainable Development Goal in its fifth goal i.e. 'gender equality'. Collective initiatives have been taken at all spheres at global, national, state, and local levels to empower the women population. The state of Manipur also witnesses these initiatives in the form of government schemes and programmes, non-government organization's initiatives, and community and individual acts. The unique standout of this state is that the women of Manipur

always come forward when there is a need which can be seen from the ‘women’s war’ of 1904 and 1939 of which the first was against British colonial rule and the latter was initiated due to excess export of rice but accompanied by an expression of revolt against colonial oppression and the corruption of the monarchy. Both the war proved to be effective. Then again women have collectively fought against drugs and alcohol as ‘Nisa Bandis’ resulting in the alcohol prohibition act of 1991. And again they came together against the Arm Forces Special Power Act (AFSPA) which was regulated in the state; their struggle resulted in the partial revoke of the act from the valley region of the state. Due to the above contributions; the women of Manipur enjoy a special status as compared to mainland India. Simultaneously the women have formed organizations for better implementation of the services to their needs. The traditional organizations formed were the Meira Paibis (torch bearers) and the Ima Keithel (mother’s market). Both the Meira Paibi and Ima Keithel are located at the state level and in each locality. Ima keithel is a market of women vendors only selling eatables, dresses, and domestic items. Meira Paibi is a group of women who work for the safeguarding of the community and society as a whole. Along with Ima vendors and Ima Meira Paibis, there are other women's organizations that have come up for the betterment of the people, especially women. One such organization is Macha Leima, it is a totally women-run organization in Manipur established with the objectives of unifying the Manipuri women without any discrimination and working for their emancipation in society. In this paper, the author through an empirical study of the Macha Leima organization attempts to understand the contribution of the organization on women’s empowerment in Imphal, Manipur.

Women and Empowerment

The term ‘empowerment’ has been widely used in relation to women and has been given currency by the United Nations in recent years. It is being increasingly felt that the empowerment of women will enable a greater degree of self-confidence, a sense of independence, and the capability to resist discrimination imposed by the male-dominated society. In the context of women, empowerment is referred to as a process whereby women become able to organize themselves to increase self-reliance, to assert their independent rights, to make choices, and to control resources which will assist in challenging and eliminating their own subordination (Meenakshi, 2004).

Empowerment is an active multi-dimensional process, which would enable women to realize their full identity and powers in all spheres of life. It would consist of providing greater access to knowledge and resources, greater autonomy in decision-making, greater ability to plan their lives, greater control over the circumstances that influence their lives, and freedom from the shackles imposed on them by custom, belief, and practice. Empowerment is an active process of enabling women to realize their identity, potentiality, and power in all spheres of their lives (Syed Afzal Peerzade and Prema Parande, 2005).

Demographic details of the workforce in Manipur

The total population of Manipur as per the 2011 census is 2,855,794 of which male and female are 1,438,586 and 1,417,208 respectively. The average literacy rate of Manipur is 76.94 percent of which male and female are 83.58 percent and 70.26 percent. The total working population is 945,213 of which male and female are 527,216 and 417,997 respectively out of which the following table shows the demarcation.

State / UT	Total workers	Cultivators		Agricultural labourers		Household industry workers		Other worker	
		Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Persons	945,213	379,705	40.2	113,630	12	96,920	10.3	354,958	37.6
Males	527,216	214,282	40.6	49,928	9.5	20,547	3.9	242,459	46
Females	417,997	165,423	39.6	63,702	15.2	76,373	18.3	112,499	26.9

Position of Women in Manipur

Shougrakpam Umabati Devi in 2014 in her paper “Determinants of Development among Women in Manipur” stated that the position of women in Manipur’s history under three heads i.e. social, economic, and political.

1. Social Conditions of Women

In the Primitive period, women held a very high social status in Manipur. There was equality between men and women – the latter even enjoyed higher status than men. The position of women in a subordinate status has been legitimized with the coming of Hinduism in Manipur. Younger women up to the age of 35 – 40 years are always engaged in domestic work irrespective of their class and status. School and college-going girls have to do a lot of domestic work before going to classes. Women are unpaid laborers at home. Educated working women are fighting very hard in the social fields of life. They are in between tradition and modernity. They have to serve their in-laws, discharge many household duties and social obligations, and work very hard not to lag behind in their offices and academic work. Thus all classes of women (educated, uneducated, richer, and poorer) are playing a great role in the social life of Manipur.

2. Economic conditions of women

About women’s economic role for example, “Weaving is the second common profession which emerges out of the people’s sentiments for it than for its profit which is negligible in the present context. Nowadays, the economic contribution made by educated working ladies is immense. Most of them work in government departments and

in the teaching profession. Of course, there are very few women who take part in the decision-making process in the family and in the society. But they are either economically better off or belong to a higher class. More than 95% of women are either suppressed (or forced) or desire to remain inferior to men.

3. The Political conditions of women

The role of women in Manipur politics can be viewed from three angles (1) Political attitudes such as awareness, commitment, and behavior, (2) Participation in the politician process as voters and candidates in elections, and (3) Their impact on the political process of the state. Levels of political awareness of women vary from time to time, from region to region class and community to community. From the very ancient times, Manipuri women always led non-violent and peaceful movements before men-folk used to take arms. They even corrected the injustice done by the king or by any officials of the state, by reporting the matter to the king. They were able to postpone the scheduled program of the king of the royal programme affecting the interest of the state. In the period (1819-1826) the state remained occupied by the Burmese. The Burmese army carried away and destroyed 3, 00,000 persons. In Manipur, this period is referred to as ChahiTarehKhuntakpa (Seven years of catastrophe). In that period, women took an active part in safeguarding Manipur wholeheartedly.

However, despite their major contributions to the socioeconomic and political life of the state, they are not given their due position in society. Thus, there is a mismatch between women's roles and status. Manipuri women's role in the socio-economic and cultural life of Manipur is significant. They do not stay behind the veil...they also do all the buying and selling of goods in the market. Women dominate the markets in the rural and urban areas. They are greatly involved in the agricultural-related activities. They are artistic and creative which they prove in the field of handlooms, handicrafts, and dance. Their dominance in the field of sports not only at the national level but also at the international level is remarkable. (Lakshmibai & Bidyalakshmi, 2013).

Contribution of Women Organizations in Manipur

The women of Manipur in their participation in social, educational, and economic fields could be viewed under two platforms. On one platform, the illiterate women participated and controlled, the market-place known as the Ima market (mother's market) at Khwairamband bazaar. The educated working women and the educated girls played their roles through a different platforms. They played their role in a multi-directional approach as an economic contributor, working women, resource persons in academic and social organizations, and a participant in the organizations etc (Devi, 2014).

The middle of the 1970s may be described as a very important stage for the women of Manipur to come out of their homes and start a mass movement for the maintenance of social order and peace in Manipur. It was in 1975 that women in large numbers started the anti-liquor movement in urban as well as rural areas as the peaceful social order in the localities was threatened by the people involved in selling and drinking of liquor. Women in

the concerned localities gathered their strength and asserted their capabilities in checking and controlling liquor-related issues. The women in groups at this stage were known as Nisha Bandis and their organizations as Nisha Bandh organizations which came to be known as Meira Paibis in Manipur (Mukherjee, 2010).

At present, they are playing crucial roles in resolving family conflicts, checking and controlling moral traffic, arresting and handing over the people involved in drug trafficking, the illegal and immoral relationships between men and women, land disputes between neighbors, theft, threats from militants for extortion, and elopement case, etc. Whenever there is any social issue affecting the interest of the people, the women in large numbers participate in dharnas, sit-in protests, rallies, demonstrations, etc. are organized from time to time (Potsangbam, 2016).

There are other women's organizations that are working for the development and improvement of society as NGOs through welfare activities like providing education, training, awareness, and organizing health camps, etc. Also, there are many women micro-finance and women entrepreneurs in the state which in return, are providing women from economically weaker sections with a source of livelihood.

Methodology

The study is qualitative in nature and uses an exploratory research design. The study has taken Manipur Chanura Leishem Marup (Macha Leima) as a case study. Macha Leima is a solely women-run organization in the Imphal East district of Manipur. The paper attempts to understand the various activities undertaken by Macha Leima and how it is leading and empowering the women of Manipur are been discussed in this paper.

Manipur Chanura Leishem Marup (Macha Leima)

Macha Leima is a total women-run organization in Manipur established with the objectives of unifying the Manipuri women without any discrimination; to working for the emancipation of women in the society; representing the state in national and international field; to work for the growth of indigenous products; and to dedicate the life for the motherland. Macha Leima since its inception has had many achievements. It was registered in 1973 but it was established in 21st April 1969. At the time of formation, it had 15-16 members only. The plot was donated by three individuals namely; Okendro Morgi, Sanayaima, and Kongba's. In April 21, 2019 its 50th foundation day was observed at lamyamba Sanglen. Macha Leima has been fighting for the "emancipation of women group in today's society", and "Emancipate women and to face male counterparts equally". It has currently around 1000 life members.

Macha Leima's aim

1. Uplifting women's status through women's education
2. Change the bounded culture of patriarchy

3. Compete with other national and international statuses women
4. Promote the growth of indigenous product
5. Dedicate life to motherland

The organization held an executive meeting once a month and a general meeting once in three years. The agenda for the monthly meeting is the current issues and when needed a meeting can be at any time. The membership fee was 1 rupee at starting but now it is five rupees. The organization looks for funding from known philanthropic and members' collective contribution whenever there is a programme or a need.

Activities carried out by Macha Leima

They have been working for the rights of the women. Alongside they have organized many health camps and trekking programmes for women. They have established macha leima schools and microfinance consisting of only women staff, and only women beneficiaries. And they have periodicals that highlight the contributions and achievements of women in the state.

Health Camps and Tracking: At the initial stage the organization used to organize many health camps and tracking programme but due to lack of funds it is not much initiated now.

States Mela participation: Participated in handicrafts mela in Delhi and in the state also, won the 2nd position in twice which was held at Hapta Kangjeibung

Social Legal Awareness: The organization provides social legal awareness every two to three years. They tried to include youth in the programme.

Macha leima RTI Apunba Nupi Lup (2010-2014): The ground-level work started in 2003. While working on the RTI movement, a death thread has been given to four of the active members of the organization namely Ibempishak Takhellembam, Memcha Sagoisem, Anita Konjengbam, and Momon Mayanlanbam to withdraw their RTI file. But they didn't shiver, and worked for justice in the case of NREGA programmes, as a result, Ningombam Indu was compensated with 4000 rupees by Keirao Bitra block on 5th February 2010.

Macha Leima School: Macha Leima School was founded in 1972. Its purpose was to make a school for the Manipuri people that could compete with the mission schools since during its formation the mission schools such as Little Flower and Don Bosco were very famous. It has classes till the 10th standard under the CBSE board. It has the strength of 20 teachers and 200 students along with 1 watchman and 1 mother. It provides a full scholarship for first rank holders in each class with a 60% and above percentage. The school has a library system and toilets, and they organize annual sports. Macha Leima also collaborates with communities and runs collaborative schools at Sugnu, Mayang Imphal, Heirok, and Lamsang.

Macha Leima Journal: Macha Leima Journal is published quarterly, i.e. once in every three months.

Macha Leima Finance: The Macha Leima Finance was started on 1st November 1997. There are only women beneficiaries. It has 5 staff members. It has won the 'North East Finance Corporate Certificate' in honor of micro finance.

Ningol Chakauba programme: Every year the organization on the occasion of ningol chakouba on 1st November organizes a feast with gifts for women of the state of any community along with an amusement program in which many renowned singers would participate.

Discussion and Conclusion

Empowerment of women means equal status to women. Here the balance of power between men and women is equal and neither party has dominance over the other. Empowering women socio-economically through increased awareness of their rights and duties as well as access to resources is a decisive step towards greater security for them. Empowerment includes higher literacy level and education for women, better healthcare for women and children, equal ownership of productive resources, increased participation in economic and commercial sectors, awareness of their rights and responsibilities, improved standards of living, and acquiring self-reliance, self-esteem and self-confidence (Ambarao Uplaonkar, 2005) which has been touched by the activities of the Macha Leima organization.

Manipur Chanura Leishem Marup or Macha Leima Organization has been providing sources for the empowerment of Manipuri Women in Imphal. Through Macha Leima School, it makes sure that quality education has been delivered to the younger generation. Women poets and writers are encouraged through recreational as well as expression of social problems through Macha Leima Journal. Macha Leima Finance provides financial assistance to women groups as well as individuals for their business sustenance. And to make the women aware of their own rights and be able to fight for themselves, the organizations have linked with legal advisors and representatives to provide successful legal awareness programmes. For refreshment and outdoor exposure, they also organize tracking programmes for women. As per the famous saying, 'health is wealth', they provide periodical health camps in their coverage area. And to preserve the local tradition, they always organize Ningol chakouba programmes with feasts for all women followed by music programme annually. To promote indigenous products and handicrafts, they participated in the Handloom mela nationally.

The Macha Leima organization acts on the quote "When women help each other incredible things happens", it does happen, through the gateway of Macha Leima the women are able to help themselves.

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