



## An Appraisal on Girls and Women Concerning Gender Roles in Naga Society: A Pastoral Outlook

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### Introduction

A couple of years ago I was in the hospital waiting for a friend who went inside the labour room for delivery. After a while she gave birth to a beautiful and adorable baby girl. As I went inside to see the baby I was astonished when the mother of the new born baby uttered “my villagers and relatives will feel pity on me because I gave birth to another baby girl.” In fact, I was not expecting to hear such statement from a person who is educated, theologically trained and living in the twenty first century. Though this incident does not imply that the mother does not love the baby girl but her first expression echoes the mentality imprinted in the minds of many Nagas. I not only hear men demeaning women but even some women speaking in the same manner devaluing female gender.

The other aspect which calls for our attention is that even in most of the churches, as L.Achilo Kikon Panmei observes “Men argue that women are not at all capable of carrying out responsibilities based on the traditional concept that they are only suitable to take care of home and not to be involved in public sphere.”<sup>1</sup> She also argues that “women who are serving as pastors in a few churches perform ceremonies like any other male counterparts, but when it comes to taking decisions as a team with male pastors, they are sidelined.”<sup>2</sup> As such, women usually find themselves discriminated in many ways. Even though there are several Naga women who are educated,

<sup>1</sup> L. Achilo Kikon Panmei, “Gender Discourse and the Church: Do Women Share Equal Power with Men?” in *Gender and Politics in India: Experiences from the Northeast*, ed. Kaini Lokho (Delhi: Akansha Publishing House, 2017), 19.

<sup>2</sup> Panmei, *Gender Discourse and the Church*, 19.

respected and in leadership position, very few notable Naga women can express their views and rights. Such privileges are denied to many other girls and women.

Owing to intervention of Baptist missionaries from America brought about Christianity to Nagaland and consequently have brought several positive changes in the lives of girls and women in almost every field particularly in the field of education. But the reality is that traditional role has remained largely unchanged and so many women and girl child become the subject of injustice in the Naga society. Today there is a growing concern regarding the role of girls and women in the Naga society.

Such incidences and queries prompt me to delve into the issue and explore the women/girl's social role in the Naga society. It is an attempt to investigate why and how patriarchy has influenced gender social role in the Naga society particularly on women and girl child thereby bring out the pastoral challenges for the present Naga churches.

## 1. A Conceptual Discussion

The fundamental concepts will be discussed with the view to correlate them with the subject the writer would be dealing with in this paper.

### 1.1. Concept of Gender and Gender Roles

The study of 'Gender' has captured significant scholarly attention. The concept of gender in feminist writings and other sociological discourses became popular in the early 1970s to describe and analyse sexual difference.<sup>3</sup> The term 'gender' has been defined as "the qualitative and interdependent character of women and men in society."<sup>4</sup> The sociologists make an important distinction between 'sex' and 'gender.' Accordingly, while the term 'sex' is equated with the biological characteristics of males and females, 'gender' on the other hand refers to the socially produced attributes of masculinity and femininity and the social arrangements based upon them.<sup>5</sup> Thus, gender, although based on biological difference, are socially and culturally created. Gender determines what is expected, allowed and valued in a woman or a man in a given context.<sup>6</sup>

Rosemary Tang states that gender roles are imposed through a variety of social influences.<sup>7</sup> According to her, it is formed during the socialization phases from childhood to adolescence, gender role issues influence people

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<sup>3</sup> Toshimenla Jamir, *Women and Politics in Nagaland: Challenges and Imperative* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 2012), 2-3.

<sup>4</sup> Jamir, *Women and Politics in Nagaland*, 3.

<sup>5</sup> Grace Laltlinzo, *Gender from a Christian Perspective: A Quest for Partnership* (Delhi: Akansha Publishing House, 2015), 29.

<sup>6</sup> Jamir, *Women and Politics in Nagaland*, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Rosemary Tang, *Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Thought* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 95, cited in Grace Laltlinzo, *Gender from a Christian Perspective*, 31.

throughout their lives; conflict can arise when someone does not feel at ease with his or her gender role.<sup>8</sup> In this regard, Grace Laltlinzo asserts that one of the strongest influences on a person's perceived gender role is his or her parents who reinforce the traditional gender roles.<sup>9</sup> As David G. Perry and Rachel E. Pauletti also affirm "youth whose parents express traditional attitudes toward gender roles are more likely to hold traditional attitude themselves." Another group that has a strong influence over gender roles is peer pressure in the form of taunting or teasing a child who does not fit the traditional gender roles. Teachers, administrators and religious institutions have great influences as they pass along cultural information and expectations.<sup>10</sup> For instance, preschool children strongly believe that people should conform to gender roles, and they strive hard to do so themselves. With the attainment of gender conservation around the age 6 or 7, children start to relax their belief that rigid conformity is imperative.<sup>11</sup> In addition, as David G. Perry and Rachel E. Pauletti asserts, "heavy viewing of television and music videos encourages traditional gender role attitudes."<sup>12</sup> Consequently, the family, peer group, educational and religious institutions, and media all participate in influencing and shaping gender roles in the Naga society.

## 1.2. The Usage of Woman in Ao Naga Dialect

Expounding the meaning of the word 'Woman' in Ao Naga dialect will be useful to identify its usage among the Ao Naga, The word *oja* means mother, *oja* or *otsüla* (our grandmother) may by the children be applied to all the aunts or all the women who are in the same *kidong* (ancestral lineage) as the mother, those older than the mother can be called *otsüla* or *oja tantsü*. and those who younger than their own mother will be called *oja taniütsü*.<sup>13</sup> *Jala Tanur tetsür* refers to a daughter.<sup>14</sup> Women are grouped in the category of *aningnoza* (the children of the sky) and *tetsur tanur* (women and minor children) that indicates the general position of women in society. Furthermore, a common statement *tetsur tanur alidak* (in the presence of women and children) is popularly used even today that differentiates the status of women from that of the men folk, sometimes rating them as minor citizen irrespective of their status, age and qualification.<sup>15</sup>

Women are still grouped in the category of 'the children of the sky' and 'women and minor children'.<sup>16</sup> This suggest that there is a growing need to examine the gender role in Naga society and explore the challenges

<sup>8</sup> Rosemary Tang, *Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Thought*, 1989), 95.

<sup>9</sup> Laltlinzo, *Gender from a Christian Perspective*, 31.

<sup>10</sup> Laltlinzo, *Gender from a Christian Perspective*, 31-32.

<sup>11</sup> David G. Perry and Rachel E. Pauletti, "Gender and Adolescent Development," *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 21, no. 1(2011): 64.

<sup>12</sup> David G. Perry and Rachel E. Pauletti, "Gender and Adolescent Development," 69.

<sup>13</sup> E.W. Clark, *Ao Naga Dictionary* (Dimapur: Heritage Publishing House, 2013), 258.

<sup>14</sup> E.W. Clark, *Ao Naga Dictionary*, 526.

<sup>15</sup> Talitemjen Jamir, N. & A. Lanunungsang, *Naga Society and Culture: A Case Study of the Ao Naga Society and Culture* (Mokokchung: Nagaland University Tribal Research Centre Department of Sociology, 2005), 216.

<sup>16</sup> Talitemjen Jamir, N. & A. Lanunungsang, *Naga Society and Culture*, 216.

facing them today with a prospect to come up with pastoral suggestion to bring transformation in the church and society.

### 1.3. Patriarchy and Patriarchal Influence

According to *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary* the word “patriarchy” refer to a society, a system or country that is ruled or controlled by men.<sup>17</sup> Alison Walker also defines patriarchy as “the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general that men hold power in all the important institutions of society and that women are deprived of access to such power.”<sup>18</sup> This means “patriarchy” is a male dominance society where men takes the advantage by controlling women and overpower their mobility and rights. In such a society, “the powerless are compelled to listen to the one whom they assume superior to them.”<sup>19</sup>

Likewise, April C. Wells argues that the female's sense of inferiority is socially determined and conditioned at birth.<sup>20</sup> So, as they grow up their dignity is deprived because in the patriarchal cultures’ dominance is assigned to the male gender. Power denotes the inherent ability or admitted right to rule, govern, and determine. In the church, this power is associated with God; however, patriarchy seems to be the dominant characteristic.<sup>21</sup> Thus, patriarchy is a form of social organization where government, rule, or domination is by men, e.g., a family/tribe where the father or the eldest male is recognized as the head of the family/tribe. Within patriarchal cultures, power allocated to males provides authority to give commands, enforce obedience, and make decisions. When authority is used to regulate, restrain, or curb women, it becomes patriarchal control.<sup>22</sup> Hence, in most societies, such patriarchal social structure provides the ideal setting for the operation of gender and related norms.<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, in the traditional Naga society being patriarchal in nature usually consists of men who occupied the position of the village head or the council. It is the men who announces for the purpose of war and peace while women remain in the background in almost all spheres of life.<sup>24</sup> Today, the patriarchal nature of the Naga society continues to have its influence in preventing girls and women from achieving full equality with men.

<sup>17</sup> *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>18</sup> Alison Walker, 1990, “Theological Foundations of Patriarchy,” *Dialogue* 23 (3): 79, accessed May 25, 2015, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a6h&AN=ATLA0000830088=ehost-live>.

<sup>19</sup> I. Asongla Pongen, *Challenges and Issues of Gender-Based Violence: A Christian Education Perspective* (Delhi: Christian World Imprints, 2020), 104.

<sup>20</sup> April C. Wells, “The Church's Contribution to Patriarchy: Destruction of the Mental, Emotional, Spiritual, and Physical Health of Women,” *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 25 (3):110, accessed May 25, 2015, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a6h&AN=ATLA0000991901&site=ehost-live>.

<sup>21</sup> April C. Wells, “The Church's Contribution to Patriarchy....,” 110.

<sup>22</sup> April C. Wells, “The Church's Contribution to Patriarchy....,” 110.

<sup>23</sup> Jamir, *Women and Politics in Nagaland*, 4-5.

<sup>24</sup> Zakali Shohe, “Transcending Beyond the Constructed Canon: The Female Voices in the Non-Canonical Books for Recovering the Silenced Voices of Naga Women,” in *Tribal Voice*, ed. V. Anshely Sumi (Dimapur: Aloino Centre, 2007), 104.

One cannot deny the positive impact on the status and role of women by the coming of Baptist American Missionaries and along with them Christianity. They brought the needed transformation in the lives of women and girl child in Naga society through Biblical teaching and modern education. However, as Vitsou Yano and Rekha Pande rightly argues,

It failed to break the age old traditional patriarchal character of Naga society. It failed to replace the nature of traditional man-women relationship dependence. The church did not really change the structure of the society. The role played by patriarchy in relation to both the traditional patriarchal assumption of the missionaries did not allow women to attain full equality with men in church, where church itself acted as an agent of patriarchy.<sup>25</sup>

It is presumed that embracing Christianity would bring changes in Christian attitudes and lifestyles but then it is observed that the Naga churches and society still cling on to the attitude that girls and women remain entrapped within the patriarchal expectations.

## 2. Girls and Women in Naga Society

A person whether men or women are socially determined by the given environment and culture. So, in instance of girls and women in Naga society as they grow up their dignity is deprived because in the patriarchal cultures' domination is assigned to the male gender. The following discussion will highlight the traditional scenario depicting girls and women role in Naga society. It will also argue that the coming of Christianity and the contemporary times have possibly opened the liberal outlook of the girls and women in the Naga society.

### 2.1. Traditional Scenario

Looking into the history, the Naga in the customary law and practices, status of women is well defined in Naga society. They have been following a well-established system of family, marriage and law of inheritance. Nagas follow patriarchal and patrilineal family systems where the major shares of the property go to the sons rather than the daughters. On the other hand, J.P.Mills aptly observes that,

“An Ao women is very far being a slave and a drudge. Her position is no whit inferior to that a man. She always has her clan behind her, and was a bad tempered husband to bully his wife he would soon have a swarm of angry in-laws buzzing around his ears, and his wife would promptly leave him. All her life a woman enjoys a considerable freedom.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Vitsou Yano and Rekha Pande, “Women’s Role in the Religious Practices in Angami Naga Society,” in *Understanding Women Issues: A Feminist Standpoint*, ed. Shahida Murtaza (Germany: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2012), 92.

<sup>26</sup> J.P. Mills, *The Ao Nagas* (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1973), 212.

While the J.P. Mills observation may present a considerable traditional scenario, the following discussion will ascertain the role and status of women and girls in Naga society.

### 2.1.1. Birth and Upbringing

In the past, as soon as the women give birth, they will chomp a small amount of rice and feed the infant and also tie a thread on the wrist. The belief behind is that childbirth is a kind of tug of war moment between God and human. After the birth, on the third day a cock will be sacrificed and the infant ears were pierced. On the third month a thread will be tied on the waist of a girl child and her hair will be shaved. Children were raised naked. The infant was looked after with great care. As the child grows up to be a teenager, mother's role is to weave a small clothe both for the boys and girls that covers their private parts.<sup>27</sup> In this regard, Mills writes, "When a girl reaches the age of puberty she can no longer sleep in her parents' house. She sleeps in *chiki* girls sleeping house. Such a house is usually occupied by three of four girls, all of the same clan and an elderly woman."<sup>28</sup> The boys and girls live in their respective dormitories. It is a place where they get informal education through folk songs, cultural dance, stories, customary laws and ethics, weaving and other handiworks.

### 2.1.2. Zunga Age Group System

Girls are included in the age group system *zunga* and enjoy equal status. They can participate in any festival and manual works arranged by their age group.<sup>29</sup> As such, in the institution of age group *zunga* system there is no distinction between men and women from the household works to the field activities. This suggest that there are certain aspects in Naga culture which can be redeemed and be used as a stimulus to combat the existing gender barriers in the Naga society.

### 2.1.3. Non-Formal Education

Before the Nagas came in contact with Baptist American missionaries, folk tales and oral historical traditions remained the sole links between the past and the present. One acquired the skills of learning folk tales by the most assiduous cultivation of the memory.<sup>30</sup> As such, women were not deprived from learning basic non-formal education especially in the field of traditional songs, history, art and culture, festivals and in religious affairs. That is why even today, according to Jamir and Lanunungsang, "many women are more knowledgeable than men in singing folk songs and other customary practices."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Rendikala, *Aotsir Sobaliba*, (Mokokchung: Ao CYE Press, 1981),15. *Aotsir Sobaliba* (Ao Women Ethics) is a rare booklet written in Ao dialect by Redikala. She carefully selected aged women in different Ao villages who could supply first hand information about traditional Ao women role in the Ao Naga society. Rendikala is one of the pioneering educated Ao women who knew the value to do research on the ancient Ao women role in the society and pen it down for the coming generations.

<sup>28</sup> Mills, *The Ao Nagas*, 212.

<sup>29</sup> Talitemjen Jamir, N. & A. Lanunungsang, *Naga Society and Culture*, 218.

<sup>30</sup> Talitemjen Jamir, N. & A. Lanunungsang, *Naga Society and Culture*, 218.

<sup>31</sup> Talitemjen Jamir, N. & A. Lanunungsang, *Naga Society and Culture*, 218.

#### 2.1.4. Marriage

Traditionally when the girl reaches the marriageable age, she cannot marry the person with whom she is interested.<sup>32</sup> Rather, it is her parents who will look for a boy who is having a good character, hardworking, suitable clan, economic position.<sup>33</sup> When a girl marries, she goes out of her father's family and comes under the authority of her husband.<sup>34</sup>

#### 2.1.5. Family Life

Naga women were to play the role of child bearing, rearing and looking after the comforts of her husband and children. Men do not expect hard work from women folk expect the household works. She is the in charge of the entire household chores where the husband is solely dependent on her. In the process of field operation, she performs the minor works as assistant to her husband. She walks safely in front of her husband while going to the field and while returning, the husband follows her.<sup>35</sup> In Ao society, they are never left behind even while returning from the field. It can be said that in many ways, the Ao woman occupy a better position than many other women do in their societies of the world in terms of sharing the responsibility, participation, recognition, and acceptance in the society.<sup>36</sup>

Nonetheless women were labelled as inferior beings, and physically a weaker sex, while men were regarded as the backbone of the society. She was treated as a dependent being, for as long as she remained under the roof of her father, she was under his care and after her marriage under the umbrella of the husband.<sup>37</sup>

#### 2.1.6. Property Ownership

The Naga customary law opts for the eldest son to inherit the property and in cases of the absence of a male child, the nearest male member of the father's family inherited the property. A girl can be named only after her father's family. She cannot draw the title of her mother. Moreover, she cannot name her children after her mother. Accordingly, on the demise of the mother in the family, even her name which is so precious is returned back to her clan members (father's clan) after a certain period of time.<sup>38</sup> Besides, major portion of the parents' properties are for the sons, whereas daughters get a minimum share like ornaments, clothes, weaving

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<sup>32</sup> Such marriage practices are still common in some families through most marriages in the present Naga society girls exercise their freedom to choose life partner.

<sup>33</sup> Rendikala, *Aotsür Sobaliba*, 18.

<sup>34</sup> Zakali Shohe, "Transcending Beyond the Constructed Canon," 104.

<sup>35</sup> Zakali Shohe, "Transcending Beyond the Constructed Canon," 104.

<sup>36</sup> Talitemjen Jamir, N. & A. Lanunungsang, *Naga Society and Culture*, 217.

<sup>37</sup> Zakali Shohe, "Transcending Beyond the Constructed Canon," 103.

<sup>38</sup> Talitemjen Jamir, N. & A. Lanunungsang, *Naga Society and Culture*, 217.

instruments, or a few household things, a small plot of land or a house in the case of wealthy family.<sup>39</sup> This specifies that the girls/women are denied what she is supposed to get and therefore, it is unreasonable and unfair.

### 2.1.7. Socio-Cultural and Religious Life Matters

In the past, women were restricted from becoming as a member in the Village Council i.e. the *Tatar Menden*. Woman could not become the religious head of her family, clan, or the village and is debarred from performing religious rites and sacrifices. Due to fear and superstition, they themselves would not go near to such scared places. However, she assists her husband in household religious sacrifice; prepare all the necessary items to be used in the sacrifice and worship like food and new wine. In the past, the AOs used to observe as many as 26 public ceremonies and 13 household ceremonies. In all these, women were not allowed to participate fully except in certain public ceremonies like *Moatsu and Tsungrem mong*. Women were also excluded from the social events as her presence was considered as a bad omen which would bring about a failure.<sup>40</sup> This restriction is in practice even today.

### 2.1.8. Burial

In the ancient days when an Ao woman died, her body would be kept on a cot made of bamboo and a fire would be lit below the body for five days. The mourners would sit around and ate food. As they ate food, they offered to the dead. The belief was that she/the dead may feel bad if the food is not served for her. If the woman was a wealthy her family would keep her belongings such as necklace and clothes outside during the five days of mourning. On the sixth day the body would be taken to graveyard where the body was kept on the high cot made of bamboo.<sup>41</sup> In the past, in Angami tribe, women who died of miscarriage or child birth were not given proper ceremony or no ceremony.<sup>42</sup> However, the manner of ritual and burial of the other Naga tribes may not be same.

### 2.1.9. Naga Folklore Portraying Women and Girls in Traditional Naga society

Naga folklore is an excellent source regarding the portrayal of the role and status of women in ancient Naga society. This also indicates its impact in the present Naga society.

#### 2.1.9.1. Folk Songs

The preference of a male child began to develop within the families. Songs were composed by parents in want of a boy or a sort of encouragement to the son to be bold enough and to be a man (unlike women). This is a song which a father sang giving advice to his son.

<sup>39</sup> I. Asongla Pongen, *Challenges and Issues of Gender-Based Violence*, 136.

<sup>40</sup> Talitemjen Jamir, N. & A. Lanunungsang, *Naga Society and Culture*, 219.

<sup>41</sup> Rendikala, *Aotsür Sobaliba*, 19.

<sup>42</sup> Vitsou Yano and Rekha Pande, "Women's Role in the Religious Practices in Angami Naga Society," 87.

My son, sharpen your *dao* spears

For a man's duty is to hunt heads,

For if not, you will be called a coward.<sup>43</sup>

The lowest degree that a man gets was to be called a woman or a coward. Therefore, with all their efforts and might the young men would go for hunting. They strive hard to take the head home. Thus, it was the dream of community to have many sons who were strong. As such there are also songs sung regarding the desire of sons.

*Songs sung at the birth of a son:*

Oh! The maker of the universe,

Bless me with many sons,

Let them be all strong warriors,

May they bring heads in dozens.

*Song sung to encourage a son:*

You my son, you are born to be a hero,

You must bring fame to the family,

By bringing heads, killing the strongest animal;

And bringing the most beautiful woman to cook for you

These songs serve as an influencing factor for all young man to live a life better and in a way different from womenfolk. All these songs are male centered. The saddest part is women/mothers who have given birth to these heroes and who have also played a great role in their growth and development are given no significance.<sup>44</sup>

This is a song that projects the social value of a girl;

Girls delay not to get married,

Because when your hair grows long, you will grow old,

When that cometh, your life is at end.

Though in a way it is nothing wrong for girls to get married when they reach marriageable age but, in this case, it implies that the life of a girl is counted useful only when she is young and therefore a kind of force is exerted on her for early marriage that is when she is still young and pretty. This explicitly indicates that the traditional understanding concerning the role of a Naga woman is child bearing, rearing and looking after the comforts of her husband and children. A woman does not have value when she becomes old and weak.

<sup>43</sup> A. Asola Jamir, "The Image of Women in selected Naga Folklore and its Impact on Naga Women Today," in *Communication and Naga Culture*, ed. L. Imsutoshi Jamir and Alitemjen Longkumer (Dimapur: Tribal Development and Communication Center, 2007), 86.

<sup>44</sup> Jamir, "The Image of Women in selected Naga Folklore," 86-87.

### 2.1.9.2. Superstitions and Sayings

There are also certain superstitions, which are carried down orally from one generation to another, which too affects the role and status women till today. Some of such beliefs are:

Man, who has to go for hunting should not sleep with his wife because it brings bad luck to them. Women are not allowed to touch the *daos* and spears of men because it is a misfortune for men. Women were restricted to eat certain food item, which the Nagas counted as delicacies because it was believed that if women take those food items, they will not give birth to healthy babies etc.

These restrictions are due to the superstitious belief that women are impure and inferior to men. Such belief makes women to draw themselves back from many activities where they are not able to utilize the talent that they possess.<sup>45</sup>

The preceding discussion suggests how the women /girls are treated as inferior to men. It can also be interpreted as constraints on women/girls' mobility and freedom to follow their aspirations. Nevertheless, there are certain aspects in Naga culture such as learning values and skills in their respective dormitories which can be redeemed to combat the existing gender barriers in the Naga society.

## 3. Contemporary Naga Women and Girls Perspective

The traditional elements have a powerful influenced upon the present generation in Naga society. The following responses of the interviewees provides the ongoing experiences of selected Naga women and girl child at home, in educational institutions, in the church and in the society at large.<sup>46</sup>

### 3.2.1. Expectations because 'I am a girl'

Ahoni states "I'm loved and accepted by my parents and others because I understand them better and I take care of all the household works."<sup>47</sup> Likewise Zubeni states "as a girl I am taught to always learn how to work household chores." She also expresses that the basic priority and the main lesson taught to her is be honest, pure and above all earn a position in a society as a responsible citizen, not confining in only one area or household chores."<sup>48</sup> Zubeni narrates, "I am loved and accepted by my parents because I am a responsible and capable daughter. I respect my parents and others."<sup>49</sup> Insula expresses that there is a big restriction wall when it comes

<sup>45</sup> Jamir, "The Image of Women in selected Naga Folklore," 89.

<sup>46</sup> Interviews were undertaken to ascertain the gender roles in Naga society from women and girls' perspective. To maintain anonymity and confidentiality the names and institution of the interviewees are fictitious. To keep responses as close as possible to the original, the wording has not been changed in writing.

<sup>47</sup> Ahoni, interview by Temsulemla Longchar, Higher Secondary Student, Dimapur, August 22, 2017.

<sup>48</sup> Zubeni, interview by Temsulemla Longchar, Higher Secondary Student, Chumukedima, August 20, 2017.

<sup>49</sup> Zubeni, August 20, 2014.

to stepping out from home after seven pm. She thinks that it is important for a girl safety. A girl with a calm nature is always appreciated whereas rough and arrogant attitude is often condemned.<sup>50</sup> Akumla is of the opinion that she is loved by her parents because she will not inherit any share of her parent's property. Once she gets married, she also does have any right to stay in her parents' house and must go to her husband's place.<sup>51</sup>

A young Naga woman laments, "I thought as a Naga I was quite proud. I thought I would belong to an egalitarian society, I thought women had rights.... But the problem with this is often my uncles, and sometimes even my father who says: But you don't need to know all about this! Or the elders say 'you are learning about your husband's culture.' They just dismiss any questions of my identity or my culture."<sup>52</sup>

### 3.2.2. The Existence of Inferiority Feeling

Some Naga adolescent girls provided reasons of their feelings of inferiority when they compare themselves with their contemporary boys. In this regard, Yawing opines, "it is a universal fact, boys are the bread earner of the family so, it is true that boys are superior. They have the strength and muscle power more than girls."<sup>53</sup> Chubala expresses that the boys are always considered strong and free to go everywhere and whereas girls are considered weak and only fit for doing household work.<sup>54</sup> Mesulü says "I feel inferior to boys because they are physically strong and mentally wild and furious. They are unable to control their emotions for example anger."<sup>55</sup> Vivi thinks that she is inferior to boys because she cannot fight back a boy even when he does something wrong.<sup>56</sup> Imsula recalls that from an early age girl were taught to be the inferior being both socially and physically. She was taught that women are considered to be the weaker section of the society. She added, "In our society men power dominates over the women. In the social gathering or social matters women's voice are not being heard. When it comes to employment women are given the less preference." Esther reports, "I feel inferior in front of boys because they usually do not treat girls properly, they try to control boys, divide classes by gender, tends to show their physical energy, used girls for sexual violence."<sup>57</sup> Vivi observes that boy's guy gets more respect in Naga society. <sup>58</sup> Nyteyia feels that boys use cunning techniques when it comes to dealing with girls. Many girls cannot raise their voice to stand for their rights. <sup>59</sup> Naga women have limited roles to play in society. The ones

<sup>50</sup> Imsula, interview by Temsulemla Longchar, Higher Secondary Student, Chumukedima, August 21, 2017.

<sup>51</sup> Akumla, interview by Temsulemla Longchar, Higher Secondary Student, Dimapur, August 21, 2017.

<sup>52</sup> [n.a], "Interview with a Young Naga Woman," in *Naga Identities: Changing Local Cultures in the Northeast of India*, ed. Michael Oppitz and others (Zürich: Snoeck Publishers, 2008), 420.

<sup>53</sup> Yawing, interview by Temsulemla Longchar, Higher Secondary Student, Chumukedima, August 22, 2017.

<sup>54</sup> Chubala, interview by Temsulemla Longchar, Higher Secondary Student, Dimapur, August 20, 2017.

<sup>55</sup> Chubala, interview by Temsulemla Longchar, Christian Higher Student, Chumukedima, August 21, 2017.

<sup>56</sup> Vivi, interview by Temsulemla Longchar, Higher Secondary Student, Chumukedima, August 22, 2017.

<sup>57</sup> Esther, interview by Temsulemla Longchar, Higher Secondary Student, Chumukedima, August 22, 2017.

<sup>58</sup> Vivi, August 25, 2017.

<sup>59</sup> Nyteyia, interview by Temsulemla Longchar, Higher Secondary Student, Dimapur, August 25, 2017.

who become involved in the society are usually talked in derogatory terms “she is just like a man” or “she talks like a man”<sup>60</sup>

### 3.2.3. The Feeling of Courage and Confidence

Zubeni expresses that because of the rapid growth of modern generation, the mentality of girls are now open and as a result girls have stepped up and have taken a higher position and earn a higher status in the society. She recalls, “Today we feel more superior to boys because many girls are excelling in technical fields and in academics.”<sup>61</sup> Chubala is of the opinion that she feels superior to boys because she is clever and smart and can deal with any situation or circumstances. <sup>62</sup>Esther feels more superior to the boys because many girls’ scores better in exams. Beside girls have better verbal skills than boys.<sup>63</sup> Rokono feel good being a girl when she get the first honour to do something “ladies first.” Besides, she observes that in many family wives handles their husband and he cooperates.<sup>64</sup> Aseno feels more superior to boys because she is emotionally stronger than boys. She says, “I am capable of supporting myself even in worst situations and still stay strong.”<sup>65</sup> Naomi expresses that feel education has given her the confidence and courage to share her views to people.<sup>66</sup>

### 3.2.4. An Analysis

Most parents raise their daughters saying that household chores are meant for the girls. The sons will obviously think that is not their job to help their sisters in household works. Eventually as they grow to be an adult and get married the sons will have the same the expectations from their wives. Many women are burnt out or suffer depression because the whole responsibility of the household including taking care of children is shouldered by women.

Another important aspect is Naga culture. Culture plays a significant role in shaping the minds of the Nagas. In this regard, Ezamo Murry affirms, “our culture provides us with one kind of script for living our life.”<sup>67</sup> Cultural scripts guide dressing, rules for sexual conduct, roles for men and women....”<sup>68</sup> Besides, as discussed above, families provide another kind of script. For example, boys should go to politics and girls to get involved in social works. The early experiences, particularly from the messages received from parents both verbal and nonverbal contributes to develop psychological script for oneself that the most part, one follow throughout

<sup>60</sup> [n.a], “Interview with a Young Naga Woman,” 420.

<sup>61</sup> Zubeni, August 20, 2017.

<sup>62</sup> Chubala, August 21, 2017.

<sup>63</sup> Esther, August 22, 2017.

<sup>64</sup> Rokono, interview by Temsulemla Longchar, Higher Secondary Student, Chumukedima, August 22, 2017.

<sup>65</sup> Aseno, interview by Temsulemla Longchar, Higher Secondary Student, Chumukedima, August 22, 2017.

<sup>66</sup> Naomi, interview by Temsulemla Longchar, Higher Secondary Student, Dimapur, August 16, 2017.

<sup>67</sup> A script is the decision one makes in early life about oneself for the rest of his/her life. A person can formulate a script about oneself according to the messages they received from the parents and the society about them. Eric Berne defines script is a decision it can be changed by a new decision. A person’s negative script can be placed by a constructive script. See Ezamo Murry, *An Introduction to Pastoral Care and Counselling* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2013), 159-160.

<sup>68</sup> Ezamo Murry, *An Introduction to Pastoral Care and Counselling*,

their lives. Similarly, the Naga girls and women are influenced powerfully by the messages they have received during their early experiences.

In addition, though modernism and Christianity seem to have opened the liberal outlook of the Nagas towards women but in reality, the girls are suppressed off their rights and privileges. This is explicitly portrayed in the responses of the Naga adolescent girls and women.

Conversely, the narration of some adolescent girls indicates that they are psychologically positive of their body and emotionally strong. It also implies that there are parents who are liberated from the traditional understanding of women view and so they raise both their sons and daughters without gender discrimination. Adolescent girls brought up in such homes will be able to come out from the shackles of patriarchal influences and can move ahead in life facing the gender challenges positively. In addition, today educational institution has been a powerful factor in the shaping the minds of the girls. Now most adolescent girls who got the privilege to study in schools and colleges have the courage to speak out their rights.

Thus, the Naga girls' identity and dignity attitudes are shape in the homes, society and church. Most of these institutions are dominated by patriarchy and its oppressive and demeaning power. Hence, obviously there is a pertaining need for unbiased gender education and women/girls child empowerment, also to diligently expound the Bible thereby affirming the role, identity and dignity of women/girls.

#### **4. Pastoral Challenges for the Churches in Nagaland**

The church as body of Christ and as an institution of change and transformation of society has a significant task to play in order to build up an egalitarian society in Nagaland. These pastoral challenges may serve as a tool to deal with existing outlook towards girls and women role in the Naga society.

##### **4.1. Challenging Taboos and Superstitious Belief**

In the past for a Naga to break a taboo was unthinkable. Panger Imchen writes, "Every new venture must be preceded and followed by superstitious observations. The breaking of the taboo is felt to definitely result in some calamity."<sup>69</sup> Every religious ceremony, communal and household, was governed by taboo. Altar or religious platforms were taboo for children and women.<sup>70</sup> While Christianity has brought drastic change in the Naga social life and beliefs including disowning the extreme belief of taboos and superstitions there are evidences that show that superstitious belief is still not totally uprooted from the minds of the Nagas. For example, I was astonished to overhear one of my female students instructing her other female friends not to set foot on the playground where the boys will be playing football match with the other team because it will bring bad luck. In other words, taboos and superstitious beliefs demeaning girls and women still exist in the Naga society. As such, the society will remain stagnant because the of the fear of bad omens. Consequently, such

<sup>69</sup> Imchen Panger, *Ancient Ao Naga Religion and Culture* (New Delhi: Har-Anand Publications, 1993), 73.

<sup>70</sup> Panger, *Ancient Ao Naga Religion and Culture*, 73.

society will retard the potential of progressing and building an egalitarian society, particularly the role and status of women and girls will be limited to past traditional system.

#### 4.2. Traditional Demeaning Attitudes

Traditionally, a woman may not become an administrator under any circumstances. Women may not participate in any public debate or decision-making. The Naga system of government is thus based on democratic principles, but does not include women. Therefore, the Naga system is not democratic in the modern sense, since it is administered by a chosen body of elders.<sup>71</sup> Such prevailing traditional attitudes in the Naga society hinder the fitting role of women in Nagaland. In this regard, Narola Imchen argues “Traditional attitudes are more important in determining male (and female) attitudes towards the appropriate role of women than a concern for Biblical model.”<sup>72</sup> These undermining attitudes towards women should not be a part of true Christianity. Hence, the church has a task to is to dismantle the demeaning attitude towards girls and women by involving women in decision making and appointing deserving women in leadership position both in ecclesiastical and society level.

#### 4.3. Liberating Women and Girls from Inferiority Complex

As Imchen rightly identifies that “Many women prefer to be where they are, and not willing to come forward to take up leadership roles. They themselves are made to feel that they are not capable of doing so”<sup>73</sup> This is evident especially among the older generation women and they themselves influence the younger generation with the same inferior mentality. On the other hand, it is also obvious that the present adolescent girls are more open and question the role and status which hinders their growth and worth. Consequently, they have healthy esteem which needs to be encouraged.

#### 4.4. Interpreting the Scripture Adequately

The scripture is often used to justify women/ girls’ roles and status in the Naga society. It is painful to listen to the lived experiences and stories of several women and girls as they express their hurts and frustrations because most Christian fathers/men will use the Scripture and the traditional sayings to rationalize their superiority and authority over women. In the church as Imchen affirms, “.... Scripture is often used to justify their exclusion from leadership roles.”<sup>74</sup> This makes it necessary for the Naga churches to critically and adequately examine the way in which they use the Scripture.

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<sup>71</sup> A. Wati Longchar, “Christianity Among the Nagas,” in *Christianity in India: Search for Liberation and Identity*, ed. E Hrangkhuma (Delhi: ISPCK, 2000), 260.

<sup>72</sup> Narola Imchen, *Women in the History of Christianity* (Jorhat: Tribal Development and Communication Centre, 2010), 190.

<sup>73</sup> Imchen, *Women in the History of Christianity*, 191.

<sup>74</sup> Imchen, *Women in the History of Christianity*, 191.

#### 4.5. Cultivating Jesus' Attitude Towards Women

There are several men in Naga society who are liberated from the clutches of traditions and attitudes that undermine women's and girls' worth and dignity. Similarly, there are Naga women who feel the presence of patriarchal elements yet they have experienced the freedom in Christ and now testify their new life in Jesus Christ.

Jesus had a positive attitude towards women and has openly challenged the male dominated society and norms that relegates women to child rearing and household chores. Jesus valued women as persons (Matthew 19:6b; Luke 8:1-3; Mark 5:25-34; John 8:3-11), ministered to women positively (Luke 7:12-13; 13:10-13; John 4:7-26), treated women with dignity in His ministry (Luke 7:46; John 11:2; Mark 14:3).<sup>75</sup> Cultivating the attitude of Jesus towards women will lessen the widening conflict between men and women in the church and society. Besides, the genuine experience of women worth and dignity will free her from her fear and inferiority complex thereby play a positive role both in the family, society and church. Vimeno Lasetso rightly said, "Women should be treated as real persons with real individual needs."<sup>76</sup>

#### Conclusion

Today education and technology are gradually awakening a feminist consciousness amongst many girls and women and they are trying to work for meaningful change in their status and roles in the church and society. The preceding discussion has also indicated that the experience of girls and women is a call to re-examine the demeaning patriarchal attitudes towards gender which has led to the creation of unfair social structure both in the church and society. Today, the church can be more accommodative for women to share equal privileges in the body of Christ and encourage the younger generation to positively exercise their skills and gifts to the fullest potential irrespective of gender. Thus, with the effort and initiatives of the churches in Nagaland, it is possible to build a society whereby both genders will have the platform to participate and contribute towards building a better Naga society.

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