

CHAPTER VI

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People's right to participate in politics is one of the essential features of democracy. However politics has been primarily monopolized by men.³⁶⁶ The participation of women in politics is rather low. Women's participation and their role in politics have been by and large constrained by patriarchal norms and practices.³⁶⁷ Gender as a social and cultural construct assigned distinct roles and status for men and women in society.³⁶⁸ Women were left out of politics by societies in the name of 'tradition and culture.'³⁶⁹ It is seen that traditional societies do not accept women's rights to decision making in politics.³⁷⁰

The status of women in the private sphere is neither better. Gender divide and perception of gender roles within households further subjugate women and limit their representation in public life. Women's participation has been limited to private sphere and there is no place for women in politics. By relegating women to the private sphere, their ability to enter in the political arena is curtailed. Their role in politics is still

³⁶⁶ Fatima Ehteshan Siddiqi, *Political Women (Country Experience in Identity and Gender Debate)*, New Delhi: Kanishka Publishers, 1999, p. iii.

³⁶⁷ Goergia Wayden, 'Analysing Women in Politics of the Third world' in Haleh Afstar (ed.), *Women and Politics in the Third World*, New York: Routledge, 1996, p. 12.

³⁶⁸ Hajira Kumar and Jaimon Varghese, *Women's Empowerment: Issues Challenges and Strategies*, New Delhi: Regency Publications, 2005, p. 23.

³⁶⁹ Toshimenla Jamir, *Women and Politics in Nagaland: Challenges and Imperative*, New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company Pvt. Ltd., 2013, p. 90.

³⁷⁰ Walter Fernandes, 'Tribal Identity, Customary Law and Modernization in Northeastern India', in Birichi K. Medhi, R.P. Athparia and K.Jose SVD, *Tribes of North East India: Issues and Challenges*, New Delhi: Omsons Publications, 2009, pp.371- 376.

nominal, and in general women are invisible in politics. Traditional society had excluded them from what is considered as masculine areas of policy. They are discriminated mainly because of their gender. Women have been relegated to second place, oppressed by society and religion. Therefore, the position of women in politics becomes deplorable. It is believed that decision making is an important indicator of position and authority in society. But women find little encouragement to participate in politics.

Various organizations, academicians, women's movement ³⁷¹ have been making efforts to break gender divide. They have been making efforts to enhance the role of women in politics by making them conscious of their rights, dignity and freedom as women. One can see the gradual increase of women's participation in politics at regional and local level.³⁷² As they become more aware of their status and rights in society vis-à-vis politics they also become more assertive in demanding their place in the political setup.³⁷³ However, women continue to be marginalized in politics, and women of Manipur and Naga women in particular are no exception.³⁷⁴

Naga society is patriarchal in nature. Men rule and administer their villages according to their respective customs and traditions. Institutions and tradition favor men. The Naga customary practices are gender biased in nature. In many ways through customs and beliefs, women's subordination is reinforced. Moreover, religion and deeply

³⁷¹ Majorie, Agosin (ed.), *Women, Gender, and Human Rights: A Global Perspective*, New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2003, p. 259.

³⁷² Zainab Rahman, *Women and Society*, Delhi: Kalpaz Publication, 2005, p. 172.

³⁷³ Op.cit., Majorie Agosin (ed.), 2003, p. 234.

³⁷⁴ Ksh. Bimola Devi, 'Manipur Women: A Study' in Naorem Sanajaoba (ed.), *Manipur Past and Present*, Vol.1, Delhi: Mittal Publication, 1998, p.170 and Sangai Express (Manipur Daily English News), 10th November, 2014.

rooted cultural structures confined women largely to the home or to invisible activities. Though there is no constitutional obstacle to women in assuming an equal political status, in reality there still exists socio-economic impediments which makes it difficult for them to have complete access to political resources and instruments available to enhance their social and economic status: discrimination in the socio religious, economic and political sphere continues to keep women in a subordinate position. It is also seen that the political arena is organized according to male norms, values and lifestyles.

Traditions still emphasize women's primary roles and responsibilities of women as mothers and wives. Women's domestic duty becomes a deterring factor in their involvement and participation in the public sphere. Women are unable to make their own decisions, voice their own opinions or protect themselves for fear of further repercussions. Moreover, household tasks, taking care of the children and elderly are not always considered as actual work. These attitudes toward gender equality are often seen as important factors in keeping women out of politics.

Consequently, women in Naga society are victim to traditional practices that violate their rights. Their social norms and beliefs seriously affect the enjoyment of rights by the women. It is also found that majority of men still think that women's participation in politics is not required and wanted the women to confine within the four walls. Majority of the men in Naga society have negative attitude and are not supportive towards participation of women in politics. Women are not visible in the public domain because they have been excluded from the public domain and confined to the private

sphere. As a result women continue to be deprived in participating in the political institutions such as Village Authority and tribe, district, and state level organizations. Thus, conservative attitude of men towards women still has an impact on the status of Naga women. Therefore, NWUM which was formed in 1994 has been focusing on various issues to bring changes in the socio-political status of Naga women in Manipur.

In this study we have noted that, NWUM through workshops on gender in relation to customary practices, gender sensitization programmes etc. strive to sensitize women on gender and also transform the attitudes and behaviour of men in order to bring gender equality. NWUM also makes every effort through various activities to disseminate knowledge and awareness on gender to all men and women in order to bring attitudinal changes in all spheres of life.

They also focus on asserting women's rights and spreading awareness about their rights._The Union has conducted fact finding missions and intervened in cases of women's rights violations and demanded for justice. Further, the Union with the other likeminded organization works for the protection and promotion of women's rights. NWUM fights for prevention of violation of rights committed by the Armed Forces Special Power Act (AFSPA). NWUM have been organizing protests, rallies, seminars etc. and advocating removal of the Armed Forces (Special Power) Act in Manipur at various levels. NWUM also informally negotiates with Indian security forces, underground armed groups, and Naga factions and groups to protect their rights, their families and community rights.

NWUM also works for the inclusion of women in the traditional village institution. They encouraged the society to ensure inclusion of women in the village institutions and also in the tribe and state level. Therefore, NWUM through workshops, seminars, conferences etc. where members of student organizations, and Village Authority are also present seek to create awareness and a plan of action to stress inclusion of women in the Village Authority, tribes' hohos, etc. NWUM plays a very important role in bringing changes in the socio-political status of Naga women in Manipur. Today we can see that Naga women have gradually started taking part in decision making process although to a limited extent.

The organization works relentlessly for the promotion of peace. NWUM organizes and conducts workshops on peace building, mediation skills, conflict management, conflict resolution etc., for its units and also for the different communities at different levels in Manipur in order to impart skills to manage conflicts. NWUM has not only taught mediation skills but has also participated in forums that bring Nagas, Kukis and other communities together to bring about peace and understanding among different groups. NWUM has been reaching out to sister organizations³⁷⁵ of other communities living in Manipur with whom they have both historical and physical affinity to work together and understand and address each other's needs and fears, in a positive direction to peace building between different communities.

Also, NWUM focuses on the peace issue by campaigning to sustain the ceasefire between Government of India (GoI) and the Nagas. NWUM also negotiates with the state

³⁷⁵ Organizations like, the Meira Paibee and Kuki Women's Union, Manipur .

and non-state armed actors, mediates between the warring factions of the Naga insurgents etc. to protect themselves, their communities and also to bring peace and normalcy in the society. NWUM intervenes, mediates, and controls internal conflicts from escalation for example in the Shirui incident and Koide incident.

However, the Naga custom continues to be an obstacle for women's participation in public sphere. Women continue to suffer discrimination in the field of politics as well as decision making and occupy a lower position as compared to men. Tradition, customs, religion etc. work against women in Naga society. Women's participation in politics is limited due to their dual roles in productive and reproductive spheres. Such discrimination of women leads to deprivation of their self confidence and eventually, their legal ability to function as full citizens or members of the larger group. As a result, women continue to remain invisible and marginalized in decision making bodies.

Even in the present Naga society the conservative attitude of men towards women still has an impact though the situation is improving. In order for women to break this barrier and come out in the open to freely voice and participate in the political arena, they need to exert immense mental and physical strength. Moreover, they need to be aware of their rights. Both men and women need to be sensitized on gender, rights and different other aspect of life.

The scholar also faced several problems and difficulties in getting women to freely and frankly express their opinions on the various issues they were asked about and

it was only with some persistence that the women did finally answer the questions put to them.

The study shows that before the formation of NWUM, the tribe level women organization's activities were limited and did not have much of an impact on the socio-political status of women although they were able to generate some awareness at the local level. Moreover, their activities were confined within their villages and tribes. However, with the emergence of NWUM which is discussed in chapter three and the various roles and activities undertaken by them for the socio-political upliftment of Naga women in Manipur some positive changes were brought about for them.

It is seen from the data that Naga Women's Union Manipur has initiated and taken up various programs. NWUM's awareness programs, workshops, seminar, conferences rallies, advocacy, etc. on gender and gender sensitization helped in bringing some positive changes in the gender discriminatory customary practices of the Naga society. All of this has not only helped Naga women to have better clarity on the exploitative nature of the customary practices but has also gradually affected the patriarchal mindsets of men who are now beginning to accept women as an important partner in society. To Quote Chara, the tribunal general of the All Naga Student Association Manipur, "we are now confirmed that in any situation everything becomes possible with the presence and participation of women". NWUM through its role is thus helping in bringing gender equality to some extent.

The study also found that NWUM disseminates information through the News link called ‘Raisunriang’ and news bulletin called ‘Our News’, on different social, economic and political issues pertaining to women. With all these activities NWUM could to some extent help Naga women become aware of different socio economic and political issues. ‘Award scheme’ also helped motivate girls and women to achieve excellence in academics and other outstanding performers in different field. It helped them to excel in various fields and thus helped in generating self confidence enabling them to play a greater role in the public domain.

The study further shows that NWUM not only helped Naga women be aware of their rights but also works for the protection and promotion of women’s rights. Attempts were made to bring awareness among the members themselves, of their own position, responsibilities and instill courage in exercising their rights through meetings, seminars, workshops, awareness program, conferences, rallies, advocacy, documentation, networking, etc. As a result the study found out that, Naga women have now started expressing their opinion and demanding their rights to be included in the village Authority, tribe hoho, district, state and to other different level organizations. Thus, women themselves have become increasingly active and fight for their rights and freedom to participate in decision making bodies.

NWUM as the representative of Naga women now share common platform with the Naga hohos, student bodies, churches, human rights organizations and other likeminded organizations. As a result of NWUM’s efforts the Naga society in Manipur is

witnessing changes though in a limited way. *Ninety-one per cent* of the respondents opined that some degree of changes in the socio-political status can be seen because of the intervention of NWUM. As such, women are now being inducted in decision making bodies ranging from churches to village administration, from tribes' apex bodies like Thangal Khanglong, Tangkhul Long etc. and State level organization such as UNC.³⁷⁶ NWUM activities have contributed to making women more aware and changing the attitudes of men though to a limited extent, as they are now more open to associate themselves with NWUM activities by participating in meetings etc.

Today, there are also instances of parent's conversion of immovable property into movable property thereby giving property to their daughters as marriage present. Some parents even gave their wet cultivation field and land to their daughters. Such practice is recognized by the society provided, the property presented to the daughters is not an ancestry property and their sons had no objection to the arrangement. This is a departure from the traditional custom and practice of the Naga society although the percentages were very low.

The study also observed that NWUM's activities in promoting peace, conflict management; developing mediation skills through workshops etc. has helped Naga women in becoming more involved in the political process. Therefore, study shows that NWUM has been participating in important peace negotiations involving the government

³⁷⁶ *Opcit.*, Naga Women's Union, Manipur, *Raisunriang (News Link)*, 1997, p. 43 and Brief Report of the 21st Annual Assembly of NWUM, October 4 to 6, 2011, Hunphun, Ukhrul District .

of India, state government, insurgents³⁷⁷ along with Naga Hohos and various peace missions during the time of conflict.³⁷⁸ There is a reported account that they have also crossed international borders to speak to the leaders of the Khaplang Faction.³⁷⁹ They also collaborate with other human rights organizations on fact finding investigations, for instance at the infamous Namtiram incident four members of the Union conducted an investigation with the Naga Peoples' Movement for Human Rights. The Naga women also initiated dialogues with Kuki and Meitei women living in their proximity with each other. NWUM activities and its intervention on peace thus had an impact on the society as on several occasions they have intervened, mediated and controlled even inter tribal and internal conflicts between the different factions of the Naga insurgents groups from escalation. Their involvement in some peace activities thus not only helped boost confidence among women but also enabled them to bring about some changes in the patriarchal mindset and also earned community acceptance for participation in the public sphere.

The study found that although women have achieved some position within the society, but even these achievements have not been able to significantly break the barrier of patriarchy and enable women to enter the decision making channels on an equal

³⁷⁷ Naga Women involved in ceasing the conflicts, particularly in sensitive times when rifts between Naga factions deepen.

³⁷⁸ NWUM had initiated a peace campaign to resolve the conflict between the two communities' through dialogue and mutual understanding. It has intervened during ethnic clashes and negotiates for peaceful resolutions. At the height of Naga Kuki clash, the Women came forward to build a bridge between the two communities and try to resolve it through non-violent means by creating awareness and mutual understanding. NWUM as a member of Forum for Reconciliation (FNR) has attended series of meeting and programs organized by the Forum. NWUM has also attended Naga people "Consultative meeting" at Bangkok, Thailand.

³⁷⁹ Rita Manchanda, *Naga Women Making a Difference: Peace Building in Northeastern India*, Women Waging Peace Policy Commission, Sanam Naraghi Anderlini, Series Editor, Hunt Alternatives Fund, 2005, p. 22.

footing. The study shows that the participation of women in decision making processes though increasing but their success is limited.

To conclude it can be suggested that the Naga society following the patriarchal system continues to impact the participation of women in politics. Institutions and tradition still favor men. However, it can be said that Naga society is transiting to a slightly more gender friendly society. Women's increasing political participation can be a source as well as a signal of social change. As globally the rising number of women in politics indicates that human beings are making progress towards a more humane world, so perhaps the Naga society will also become over time a gender free society. The contribution of NWUM in this direction is note worthy.