

## **Unveiling Women's Economic Contribution: A Study of Livelihood Activities in Tousem Village, Manipur**

Kamei Beeju, Pounga Newme

In contemporary discourse, the female labour force encounters persistent marginalization in its pursuit of acknowledgment and respect. Within the fabric of Indian society, the labour or service endeavours undertaken by women in the domain of homemaking often remain unacknowledged, notwithstanding their substantial contribution to the domestic economy. This study critically examines the role of women in livelihood activities as an indispensable component in cultivating acknowledgment coupled with respect and recognition. The ethos of respect and recognition serves as a catalyst for individuals in their pursuit of fostering peace and harmony within the societal milieu. Within this context, the economic contributions made by women often languish in obscurity, characterized by the paradoxical phenomenon of remaining both unpaid and invisible. In Tousem, Tamenglong District of Manipur, women are lauded for their active roles in driving economic and social change, alongside their commitment to environmental stewardship. This research aims to highlight their key economic contributions to uplift their families and communities. Additionally, it seeks to unveil the status of women in village contexts, shedding light on gender dynamics. Through this inquiry, the study emphasizes the need for greater recognition and support of women's diverse efforts, providing insights for both scholarly discourse and practical policymaking towards gender equity and empowerment.

**Keywords:** Women, Labour, Livelihood, Recognition, Respect, Tousem Village, Manipur

### **Introduction**

All living beings share the fundamental aspect of survival, with securing sustenance being paramount to human existence. This quest for livelihood, as articulated in the 1974 World Food Conference, is not merely a personal endeavour but a collective responsibility, ensuring opportunities for future generations. At its core, livelihood encompasses the means and objectives of existence, serving as the foundation upon which individuals construct their lives (De Haan & Leo, 2012; Septanti et al., 2023).

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It spans a spectrum of activities and resources essential for sustenance, including access to water, food, shelter, and healthcare. Defined as the culmination of efforts aimed at sustaining life, livelihood activities are both individual and communal, leveraging human and material resources to meet the needs of individuals and households while fostering sustainability and dignity (Hajdu, et al., 2020). Thus, livelihood not only sustains life but also embodies a commitment to holistic well-being and the preservation of resources for future generations. It is not only essential for sustenance but also serves as a primary motivator for young individuals, intertwining with their career aspirations. It encompasses any meaningful and productive activity that holds economic and social significance (Bernzen, et al., 2023) and the diverse roles across various sectors, including the public and private spheres, government institutions, and non-governmental organizations, as well as both organized and unorganized sectors. Occupations span across categories such as business, service provision, agriculture, and related professions, which encompass crafts and trades. Among these diverse pathways, the realms of business, service provision, agriculture, and related professions stand as pillars of economic activity, offering multifaceted opportunities for employment and contribution (Aoyama, et al., 2010).

Within the sphere of business, a plethora of opportunities abound, ranging from entrepreneurial ventures to corporate enterprises, each offering unique challenges and rewards. Entrepreneurship, in particular, embodies the spirit of innovation and risk-taking, as individuals embark on ventures to meet unmet needs or capitalize on emerging trends in the market (Skinner, et al., 2018). Service provision, on the other hand, encompasses a wide array of roles aimed at meeting the diverse needs of individuals and communities. From healthcare and education to hospitality and transportation, service-based occupations play an indispensable role in facilitating the smooth functioning of society. Within this domain, professionals ranging from doctors and teachers to waiters and taxi drivers contribute their skills and expertise towards enhancing the quality of life for others. In contrast, agriculture represents a timeless and foundational occupation, deeply rooted in the cultivation of land and the production of food. As noted by Hilson and Garforth (2012), agricultural pursuits serve as the backbone of many economies worldwide, providing not only sustenance but also a crucial source of livelihood for millions of individuals. From small-scale subsistence farming to large-scale agribusiness operations, people engage with the land to harness its bounty and support themselves and their communities. However, despite women contributing nearly fifty percent in both the production of goods and the service industry, their significant contributions often go unnoticed and unrecognized on a larger scale, leading to their marginalization when advocating for greater visibility and acknowledgment.

Some occupations require specialized skills and knowledge, which can be acquired through formal training and apprenticeships. However, this system has its advantages and disadvantages. In communities with a traditional caste system, individuals were often associated with specific professions that were passed down through family lines. While this ensured specialization within certain trades, it also limited individuals

from pursuing alternative career paths (Ahuja, 2014). Skilled craftsmen and women, such as carpenters, electricians, tailors, and artisans, work diligently to produce goods and services that contribute to the cultural richness of society. The diversity of available occupations highlights the various ways in which people earn a living and contribute to their communities (Heley & Jones, 2013). Each occupation, whether in business, service provision, agriculture, or related fields, presents unique challenges and opportunities that influence the experiences and aspirations of those who choose these paths. The increasing involvement of women in economic activities since India's independence emphasizes the interconnection of these sectors and their vital role in sustaining modern society. However, despite the significant contributions of women to the labour force, their efforts are often overlooked. This disparity emphasizes the need for collaboration and cooperation to achieve shared prosperity and ensure that all members of society, regardless of gender, are recognized and valued for their contributions to economic growth and societal progress.

Services are provided by a wide variety of entities, including governmental bodies, corporate enterprises, and non-profit organizations. These entities offer employment opportunities that range from sporadic to long-term engagements. It is worth noting that self-employment is particularly prevalent in the unorganized sector, where individuals start small businesses that embody the entrepreneurial spirit inherent in livelihood pursuits. The pursuit of livelihood plays a central role in guiding individuals through their educational and vocational endeavours, ultimately serving as the cornerstone of human existence. Therefore, this study specifically examines women's participation in livelihood opportunities and their role in contributing to the economy within the home. The present study focuses on women's involvement in livelihood activities in Tousem, Tamenglong District of Manipur State, India. It illustrates women's engagement in economic activities and their impact on household well-being within the specified geographic context, highlighting how they are often overlooked and lack acknowledgment, recognition, and respect.

The socio-cultural fabric of Northeastern Indian tribes (NER) is undergoing rapid transformation, with consequential implications for women's status. Traditional practices, such as endogamy and bride price, which historically elevated women's position, are experiencing erosion (Upadhyaya et al., 2024). Contemporary trends, including "love marriages" often accompanied by religious conversions, contribute to women's increased distance from natal kin, potentially undermining their economic and emotional security (Shohe, 2021). Moreover, the transition from bride price to dowry, mirroring non-tribal norms, exacerbates the decline in women's status (Storkey, 2015). Concurrently, shifts in land management systems, particularly in matrilineal Khasi society, where privatization of communal land and its transfer to male ownership have occurred, further erode women's economic independence (Kelkar & Krishnaraj, 2013). These interconnected factors collectively contribute to a growing gender bias and a diminished status for women in the NER (Sinha, 2015).

### **Method of the Study**

Tamenglong, a hill district in Manipur, is well-known for its orange production and

relies heavily on agriculture for its economy, specifically paddy cultivation. Livestock and poultry farming also play a significant role. The district's livestock consists of cattle, buffalo, and pigs, among others. Household livelihood security encompasses the ability to access income and resources in a sustainable manner to meet essential needs such as food, water, healthcare, education, housing, and community engagement (Singh & Hiremath, 2010). This study focuses on examining the crucial roles of women's engagement in livelihood-generating activities within Tousem village, a prominent Zeme settlement located in Tamenglong District, Manipur. Tousem village is situated 52 km away from the district headquarters and is comprised of New Tousem and Old Tousem. The study specifically looks at the agricultural practices of the Zeme tribe, which primarily involve shifting cultivation (Jhum). This traditional method is supported by supplementary activities and thrives within the village economic ecosystem. The village is bordered by the Mukhru River to the east and the Jiri River to the west. Christianity, particularly the Baptist denomination, is prevalent among the villagers and greatly influences their social and cultural fabric. Infrastructure in New Tousem includes a Primary Health Centre, a government high school, and a private school, all of which are essential for healthcare and education within the community.

This study aims to investigate the current situation of women in a rural village context. It utilizes a combination of descriptive and exploratory research designs to explore this less studied area. The study draws inferences from the livelihood practices of the Zeme tribe. However, it is important to note that the findings may differ across all communities, as the engagement of women in livelihood generation can vary. The decision to adopt an exploratory approach stems from the limited existing literature on the subject, highlighting the need for a comprehensive investigation into the lived experiences of women in the village. Data collection took place over a period spanning from January 2022 to June 2023, utilising semi-structured interviews as the primary methodological tool. This approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of women's perspectives, experiences, and challenges within the socio-economic landscape of the village. The researcher also conducted interviews with key community stakeholders (village head, head of the household, NGO staffs, bank officials, private money lenders etc.) to gain insights into the broader societal dynamics that shape women's roles and opportunities.

In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the daily lives and economic roles of women in Tousem village, this study utilized a qualitative approach. The study focused on conducting in-depth interviews using a semi-structured interview schedule. Participants were asked about their daily routines, from morning to evening, in order to shed light on the various responsibilities they have. The research also examined the factors that influence their participation in livelihood activities, aiming to uncover both the motivations and constraints that shape their economic involvement. Additionally, the study explored the sociocultural context by examining the level of respect given to women within their families and communities. By investigating the challenges faced by women in their economic pursuits, the study aimed to identify the barriers that hinder their empowerment and find potential ways to intervene and

provide support. The study also investigated whether women expect recognition for running the family and whether they have decision-making power.

Observations also played a crucial role in capturing the nuanced realities of women's lives within the village setting. By immersing themselves in women's daily routines and interactions, the researchers gained a deeper understanding of the multifaceted roles and responsibilities that women bear in their households and communities. To ensure the inclusion of diverse perspectives and experiences among the study participants, the researchers employed purposive sampling. The study selected a total of 40 women until response saturation was achieved. These women represented different age groups within the 20–50 year range, which allowed for a comprehensive exploration of their livelihood activities and how they impact household wellbeing. Pseudo names have been used in the current study to represent the respondents' identities due to ethical considerations.

Through a meticulous process of data collection, this study shed light on the various ways in which women actively contributed to the economic, social, and emotional aspects of village life. By amplifying the voices and experiences of women, the research challenged existing stereotypes and misconceptions about their roles and capabilities both within and beyond the household. Additionally, the study sought to promote dialogue and collaboration by involving key stakeholders and members of the community, with the goal of creating more inclusive and equitable opportunities for women's empowerment. Ultimately, this study is a crucial step towards recognizing and appreciating the invaluable contributions of women to the well-being and prosperity of rural communities in India. By amplifying their voices and experiences, the research seek to advocate for policy interventions and grassroots initiatives that prioritized gender equality and women's empowerment. Through a comprehensive understanding of women's roles and aspirations, this study aimed to pave the way for a more just and inclusive society where individuals of all genders could thrive and contribute to the collective well-being.

Culture and gender have a significant impact on people's livelihoods as they shape societal norms, practices, and opportunities (Best & Angelica, 2019). Gendered cultural norms often result in unequal access to resources and opportunities, particularly affecting the types of work available to women (Kabeer, 2021). This article follows a theoretical framework that argues patriarchy and entrenched societal norms hinder women's progress, aligning with feminist theories that critique patriarchal structures for impeding women's equal rights. It also resonates with radical feminist perspectives, which perceive male-dominated power structures as the root causes of oppression and inequality (Singh & Sinha, 2024). The study concludes that as long as these patriarchal values persist, achieving meaningful societal reform will remain a formidable challenge.

### **Women and Livelihood: A Local Context**

For a healthy society, it is imperative that all stakeholders fulfill their roles and responsibilities in an equitable manner (Riley, 2002). These stakeholders include the village head, head of the household, NGO staff, bank officials, and private money lenders. Their collective contribution is essential for overall development. While

women in many developing nations now enjoy equal rights, respect, acknowledgment, and the opportunity to lead free and prosperous lives, the situation in India remains challenging (Jain, 2005). Despite shouldering a significant share of responsibilities in various regions, women in India often struggle to receive the recognition and respect they deserve (Parikh & Garg, 2023). However, in Manipur, women play a pivotal role as productive labourers, making significant contributions to the home and state economies (De & Devi, 2023). Their financial contributions to household needs are substantial, highlighting their integral role in sustaining livelihoods. Furthermore, sectors such as agriculture, food security, horticulture, processing, nutrition, sericulture, fisheries, and related industries acknowledge the importance of women and focus less on their indispensable contribution to agricultural growth and societal well-being. When asked about the response of various stakeholders in society, such as village heads, heads of households, NGO staff, bank officials, and private money lenders, to women, one of the respondents expresses:

In this community, it feels like nobody really cares about anyone. During election time, village heads might show some concern, but it's only temporary. Heads of households only seem to care when someone is economically contributing to the family or taking care of the children. NGOs do offer some help, but it's limited to guidance rather than financial assistance. I have heard about NGOs providing guidance aid, but personally, I haven't received any. Money lenders, on the other hand, are only interested in pawning jewellery, so it's hard to say if they genuinely care. It seems like everyone is just looking out for their own interests. Bank officials require guarantees, but how can we provide one when we are poor? In this situation, survival is our main concern, and we have to rely on ourselves to maintain our self-respect and provide for our families (Lule, 38 years old).

Support systems for women who are trying to manage both work and household responsibilities are often inadequate or conditional. Village leaders are seen as influential during election time, but their ongoing support for community members is limited. Similarly, household heads often only support women if they are contributing economically or taking care of childcare responsibilities. NGOs provide guidance, but without significant financial assistance, women struggle to make economic progress. Additionally, strict collateral requirements imposed by banks limit access to credit, further exacerbating financial constraints. The combination of gender, poverty, and social capital significantly limits women's economic independence (Knack, 2002). Patriarchal norms that prioritize male breadwinners contribute to and reinforce gender inequalities.

In Manipur, women hold the moral responsibility for managing various aspects of the family, such as daily tasks like cooking, taking care of the family garden, and helping with food and livestock production (Shimray, 2004). The status of motherhood in Manipur gives women a sense of elevated importance and provides them with greater security compared to being just a wife. This responsibility is deeply rooted and integrated into the fabric of society. Samantroy (2017) demonstrates that the

northeastern states, particularly Manipur and Tripura, have the highest percentage of female workers in the secondary and tertiary sectors. This statistic highlights the significant contribution of women to the workforce in these regions, especially in non-traditional roles. In response to the question about how your day begins and ends, one of the respondents explained:

As a woman, I have the responsibility of preparing food for my family. So, I wake up at around 4 AM in the morning to start cooking. After that, I need to go to the fields to collect and take care of vegetables. Sometimes, I also have to do laundry and other household activities. Once that is done, I go hawking and try to return home early so that I can prepare dinner for my family in the evening. During the marketing process, my husband and children help me reach the hawking place, and on the way back, they bring the remaining vegetables and other things (Joyee, 46 years old).

Joyee's account sheds light on the complex and challenging roles of rural women. Her daily routine, which involves household chores, agricultural work, and income-generating activities, highlights the heavy responsibilities that women in the community bear. This workload reflects the gendered division of labour, wherein women are primarily responsible for both reproductive and productive tasks. According to Franken Berger (1996), women have a crucial role in various economic activities, contributing significantly to improve their families' economic status and the overall well-being of the community. Similarly, in Tousem village, women are active agents of economic, social, and environmental change. Despite facing constraints in their roles as farmers, producers, investors, caregivers, and more, they play a pivotal role in ensuring food and nutrition security, poverty alleviation, and improving their family's well-being and the village's socioeconomic status.

### **Women in Zeme Society: Patriarchy, Gender Roles, and Cultural Practices**

The Zeme tribe, a patrilineal society in Northeast India, adheres to gerontocracy and patrilocal residence. Despite the influence of Christianity, traditional customs still govern marriage, justice, and daily life. Gender inequality remains widespread in India, including in tribal regions, with a growing gender gap particularly evident in child-focused indicators. Economic factors and a preference for sons often undermine tribal customs that might otherwise offer some protection for women (Atungbou, 2016). Women in tribal societies typically occupy subordinate positions due to patriarchal structures and rigid gender roles. Traditionally, they managed domestic responsibilities and childcare, while men controlled decision-making and public spheres (Lalkima, 2009). However, as the socio-economic landscape evolves, many women have taken on additional roles. They now contribute economically through activities such as hawking and street vending, balancing traditional expectations with new economic realities. This shift highlights both the progress and the ongoing challenges women face in these changing contexts.

The Ima market, also known as the women's market, exemplifies the collective economic prowess and cultural importance of Manipuri women (Haripriya, 2017).

Here, women play a central role in managing and operating the marketplace, showcasing their entrepreneurial spirit and business acumen. Furthermore, in Manipur, society scrutinizes any perceived economically inactive woman, underscoring the prevalent expectation of female productivity. Ima Keithel, one of Asia's largest marketplaces exclusively managed by women, serves not only as an economic hub but also as a symbol of political and social empowerment for Manipuri women. Through their resilience and agency, these women have carved out a space for themselves in the economic landscape of Manipur, challenging traditional gender roles that do not exist in other parts of India and asserting their rightful place in Manipuri society. As one of the respondents expresses in response to how women manage all the tasks of home and economic activity at the market:

In Manipur, the agriculture industry relies heavily on women. As parents participate in a variety of economic activities, one of which is teaching our children, we here play a key role in the family's and society's sustainable economic growth. The mother is also the primary figure in the family and household. Every member looks to us (women) for validation, empathy, and understanding. Women give our time, effort, and attention to ensure the well-being of our families, communities, and fellow humans. We, as women, are trained to contribute more and feel responsibility pertaining to our family (Sue, 36 years old).

She embodies the spirit of empowerment and self-reliance. Training initiatives, though unintentional, encourage women to take on more responsibilities and actively contribute to their families' well-being. Particularly in Manipur, women working in the Ima market find inspiration and support from their peers. This fosters a culture of economic empowerment and collective progress. Despite their numerous responsibilities, these women are motivated to achieve economic independence and play a crucial role in providing for their families. Puia (2023) also highlights that Manipuri women's ethos of self-reliance and empowerment not only challenges traditional gender roles but also fosters a sense of community and solidarity among women. By overcoming obstacles and seizing opportunities, these women are reshaping Manipur's social fabric. They are creating a more inclusive and equitable society where every individual, regardless of gender, has the opportunity to thrive and contribute to the collective welfare. This remarkable example sets the stage for other states. However, these women still face obstacles in receiving the same respect and acknowledgment as men.

Tousem is a sizable Zeme village located approximately 52 kilometres away from the district headquarters in Manipur's Tamenglong District. The village is divided into New Tousem and Old Tousem, with a total of 2,816 residents across 434 households, including 1,355 men and 1,461 women. New Tousem village, with 241 houses and 1,408 inhabitants, engages in agricultural activities, which involve the majority of the population (Bowden, 2020; Behera & Verma, 2022).

As Sobha (2001) explains, the socioeconomic conditions of women involved in agricultural activities reflect their status within society and highlight their integral



role in generating livelihoods for family sustenance. Various factors affect their socioeconomic standing, such as age, level of education, income, debt burden, and the amount of time dedicated to farm work. When asked about their role in livelihood generation in Tousem village, one respondent aptly remarked:

We undertake all tasks that men do, but with greater responsibility. We prioritize the well-being of our children, and nature has endowed us with inherent strength, as we are the producer and caretakers of generations (Zang, 49 Years Old).

Women possess a natural instinct for caregiving, which has allowed them to amass a considerable fortune. It is crucial for them to acknowledge this reality, as well as the numerous responsibilities they bear in supporting their families and communities. This sentiment underscores their strength and unwavering commitment as caregivers and as the creators of future generations.

In Tousem Village, women encounter considerable obstacles in managing household responsibilities and providing essential support, despite their central role within the family structure. These challenges are exacerbated by limited educational opportunities and high illiteracy rates among women in the village. While educated women recognize that their roles extend beyond traditional family duties—encompassing potential contributions to various productive endeavours—they frequently face discrimination when they assert themselves. The patriarchal framework often attributes their aspirations and actions to the education of girls, rather than recognizing their merit. Conversely, advocates for educational equality support the idea that women should have equal access to educational opportunities. The marginalization of women's voices due to a lack of education impedes their ability to make significant decisions for their families and the community. This educational deficit leads to diminished autonomy and confidence, further hindering women's capacity to advocate for their needs. Despite broader societal norms in India that often restrict women's independence and agency, indigenous women in Tousem Village exhibit a relatively higher degree of autonomy. Their social interactions and freedom of movement are less constrained compared to other contexts. While they continue to face challenges, these women display notable resilience and agency in navigating their lives within the confines of their cultural environment.

In the Zeme community, women primarily engage in agricultural labour while also fulfilling their traditional household responsibilities such as food preparation, childcare, laundry, and fieldwork. Despite their significant contributions, they often receive less respect compared to men. This inequality is particularly evident when women are the sole providers for their households. In such cases, they face compounded challenges as they receive minimal and often ineffective support from institutions like village heads, banks, and NGOs. The lack of recognition for their hard work reflects the patriarchal values that undermine women's contributions. In contrast, men who perform similar tasks are usually given greater respect and recognition for their role in supporting the family. Furthermore, societal attitudes frequently stigmatize women who work outside the home, unfairly questioning their character and commitment. This discrepancy highlights the importance of acknowle-

dging and respecting women's roles and contributions within both domestic and broader social contexts.

### **Women and Challenges**

A woman seeks acknowledgement as an equal participant in all aspects of life, with respect and support for her contributions and aspirations (Kittay, 2019). She wishes for recognition in both professional and personal realms, equal opportunities for advancement, and fair treatment (Finley, 1986; Wilkins, 1998). She aims to be valued for her individual skills and efforts, rather than just traditional gender roles. Respect and support for her ambitions are crucial, including encouragement, mentorship, and resources (Hill & Wheat, 2017). She also seeks fairness in the distribution of responsibilities, recognizing the double burden she often carries. Ultimately, she desires empowerment, autonomy, and the freedom to make choices that shape her life and future, free from societal constraints (Bianco, 2023). As one of the respondents expresses:

As a woman, I desire recognition in various significant aspects of our lives. I seek acknowledgment for my contributions and accomplishments, whether in my career or personal pursuits. Equal opportunities for advancement and fair treatment are crucial to me. I want to be valued for my abilities rather than being limited to traditional gender roles. This is what recognition means to me. Support and encouragement in pursuing my goals are vital, as I often run the household. Therefore, I expect respect, as well as a fair distribution of household and professional responsibilities. Ultimately, I long for empowerment and the freedom to make choices that have an impact on my life and future. However, in many families, I don't find space in decision-making and don't feel valued without being hindered by societal limitations. Personally, I advocate for this, and I hope that as our society evolves, women will gradually gain the positions we deserve." (Widonlu, 54 years old).

Widonlu expression conveys that women aspire to recognition and acknowledgment for their contributions in various aspects of life. They seek equal opportunities, fair treatment, and support to overcome traditional gender roles and achieve their full potential. A balanced distribution of household and professional responsibilities, along with respect, is fundamental. Ultimately, women desire empowerment to shape their own futures without societal constraints. Despite progress, ongoing societal transformation is needed to fully meet these aspirations (Ourahmoune & Jurdi, 2024).

The increasing representation of women in the global workforce is a significant societal transformation with far-reaching consequences (Trask, 2009). To understand women's experiences, it is crucial to analyze gender roles, job dynamics, and family dynamics from a comparative international perspective (Scott, 2013). Employment offers women the opportunity to achieve financial independence, enhance their skills, and integrate into society (Meler & Benjamin, 2022). However, it also presents challenges in terms of managing work alongside household duties and family commitments. This global revolution has important social, political, and economic

implications, underscoring the need for thorough analysis. An essential task is to examine the similarities and differences in women's experiences, considering factors such as social class, education, and geographical location, in both industrialized and developing countries (Buchmann & Hannum, 2001). Additionally, it is equally important to understand the implications of these changes for men. Real-life examples and case studies from various countries provide valuable insights into women's actual experiences worldwide. Despite policy reforms and the use of persuasive language promoting gender equality, women still face distinct obstacles and inequalities in both their professional and personal lives compared to men (Jackson, 2010). To address these disparities, continuous efforts are needed to advance gender parity and foster inclusive environments in all aspects of life. In response to the question about the types of difficulties women face, one of the respondents elaborates:

As a woman, I am acutely aware of my limitations. Due to government regulations that disproportionately affect those of us without substantial resources, I am compelled to return home early. We are bound by customary laws that impose additional constraints. Although there may be some welfare initiatives, I have not observed any substantial improvements. Despite my efforts in selling cosmetics and engaging with others, I have not seen any meaningful changes. It appears that exploitation of women by men persists. In terms of respect, we are often addressed in a dismissive manner, such as 'hey! come here,' though I acknowledge that there are individuals who do show genuine respect. It is the presence of these respectful individuals that helps maintain some semblance of societal harmony (Reemi, 36 years old).

Sometimes, incidents occur that make women more conscious. It is ingrained in the minds of women that they may face exploitation, and therefore they must be cautious and take preventive measures to avoid any problems. It is important to note that local customary laws often have a greater impact than national laws that aim to protect women. However, these national laws are often less effective in the local context.

Access to healthcare is not only a fundamental human right, but also essential for a healthy and sustainable society. Adequate healthcare not only increases lifespan, but also improves productivity, leading to peaceful and prosperous communities (Cerf, 2023). In today's world, women and children in particular require specialized care and support, making access to medical facilities crucial. However, the women of Tousem village face numerous challenges, including limited access to essential healthcare and other facilities. In response to the question of how women manage their healthcare needs, one respondent explains:

Usually, healthcare experts provide certain medications for various illnesses. However, in urgent situations, individuals often need to buy medicines from private medical shops. While it's a relief that there are no consultation fees, more severe conditions require a visit to the district hospital. Due to limited financial resources and a shortage of medical experts, women frequently turn to natural remedies as a more affordable option. Although we hope the government will deploy more

doctors, we have a strong belief in traditional methods of treatment. When all else fails, we turn to the hospital (Junle, 47 years old).

The local primary health centre's inability to provide proper medical assistance during childbirth worsens their situation. These challenges not only threaten the health and well-being of women and children, but also hinder the overall development and resilience of the community. Additionally, transportation and communication infrastructure deficiencies prevent them from marketing their products beyond the village, limiting their economic opportunities and forcing them to sell at lower prices within the local market. In the past, women in Tousem Village had less independence and autonomy, but positive change is now underway with improved communication and the development of some infrastructure facilities. As one of the respondents expressed:

We need better transportation facilities. During the rainy season, life becomes extremely difficult. Although improvements in telecommunications allow us to stay in touch with our loved ones, transportation issues severely hinder our ability to generate a livelihood. It is very challenging to reach the market and return on time (Aring, 38 years old).

The daily lives of people and economic activities are greatly affected by the insufficient transportation infrastructure, particularly during the rainy season. Although telecommunications have improved connectivity with family and friends, the ongoing transportation challenges seriously hinder the ability to earn income by making it hard to access markets on time. Improved transportation facilities are essential in overcoming these difficulties and promoting income generation.

Many societies, including Tousem village, often burden women with numerous domestic responsibilities. These tasks range from tending to kitchen gardens and fetching water to weaving and gathering food throughout the day. While these tasks are essential for household functioning, they have historically confined women to the realm of domesticity. This has limited their engagement in broader societal affairs (Matchar, 2013; Cowan, 2023). Additionally, women's participation in political processes has been notably restricted, especially in selecting representatives who can advocate for their interests. Despite a prevailing reluctance among women to actively involve themselves in politics, there has been a noticeable shift in recent years. Women have gained increased influence within village decision-making processes. However, entrenched barriers continue to hinder women's full realization of their political rights and their potential for meaningful participation in governance structures. Overcoming these barriers is crucial to ensuring gender equality and inclusive governance. It is essential that women's voices are not only heard but also valued in shaping the future of their communities. In response to the question about voting preferences and the underrepresentation of women candidates, one respondent elaborates:

During elections, we are instructed to vote for a specific symbol rather than based on personal preference, and there is little emphasis on individual choice. Politicians

often make numerous promises, but few are fulfilled. Our exposure to politics is limited, and decisions are largely influenced by wealthy individuals. I believe women are undervalued compared to men, as we are typically confined to household responsibilities. When I do have time, I focus on livelihood generation and managing family affairs. Our decision-making power is minimal, and it often feels as though no one genuinely considers our needs (Daime, 53 years old).

Electoral processes and political representation are heavily influenced by wealthy individuals, resulting in minimal impact on the lives of ordinary people, especially women. The lack of attention to individual voting preferences and the frequent failure to fulfill political promises foster a sense of disillusionment. Women, who are often confined to household responsibilities and face limited opportunities for political engagement, feel undervalued and excluded from decision-making processes. This reflects broader issues of political neglect and gender inequality in representation and influence.

In Tousem, women play a crucial role in supporting their families and the community. However, they face significant challenges, including limited access to healthcare, inadequate transportation, and restricted opportunities for personal advancement. Despite these obstacles, women remain central to the social fabric of the village. Therefore, it is essential to advocate for improved medical facilities and greater support for women's achievements, both within their families and in the wider community.

### **Livelihood Engagement: Village and Women**

Gender has a significant impact on the experience of poverty, especially for women who often bear a disproportionate burden of household responsibilities. Women often work long hours in low-paying jobs, such as street vending, agricultural labour, hawking, and selling goods on the roadside. However, their contributions to managing household tasks like cooking, farming, and washing clothes are not given proper recognition. As a result, they have limited access to household income and little financial control, leading to what is known as "secondary poverty." Despite their hard work, women usually receive inadequate financial compensation that does not effectively support their families. This systemic disparity highlights how gender roles worsen economic hardships, leaving women with minimal financial gain or control over their earnings (Dubey, 2016).

In India, a significant portion of the population continues to struggle with deep-rooted poverty and insecurity. This is due to factors such as unequal access to basic necessities, socio-political disparities, and human rights violations. Rural women are particularly affected by these issues. These marginalized groups, especially women, face structural barriers imposed by social, cultural, political, and economic factors. These barriers further exacerbate their vulnerability within society. Limited freedoms and restricted access to resources make it difficult for women to pursue livelihood opportunities, undermining their human security (Howard-Hassmann, 2012). Moreover, their limited engagement in socio-economic and political spheres hinders their potential to contribute to societal progress.

It is worth noting that in Manipur, women play a significant role in household affairs and actively participate in generating livelihood options. Primary data from Tousem Village supports this, showing that the majority of selected women engage in cultivation, while others take on various roles such as private tutors, teachers, nurses, or caretakers.

Furthermore, a significant number of women in the region live in joint family setups, and the majority are actively involved in mixed farming on medium-sized agricultural plots ranging from 3 to 6 acres. These women engage in agricultural activities to both sell their produce and meet the needs of their families. It is important to mention that despite their limited access to education, many women in the village earn a significant income from selling livestock and poultry. However, it is a common observation in various regions of India, including Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Delhi, Haryana, Punjab, and others, that decision-making within households is predominantly controlled by male figures. This is the case even though women play a vital role in contributing to the household income. It is worth noting that men are recognized, respected, and acknowledged as decision-makers in families, regardless of their lower contribution compared to women (Farnworth et al., 2021). This disparity is unjust for the women of Tousem village.

Furthermore, women in this region face notable challenges, including a lack of access to cooking gas and inadequate infrastructure for marketing agricultural products. The primary obstacle to supporting their families is financial constraints. Additionally, the village's socioeconomic condition necessitates improved road connectivity. Moreover, there is a general lack of awareness regarding government welfare schemes and limited future planning among the respondents, highlighting the need for increased information dissemination and capacity-building initiatives (Lahariya et al, 2020). Over time, there have been noticeable changes in cultivation methods, such as a decrease in farmers' working hours, inconsistent electricity supply, and reduced participation in religious activities. The multifaceted challenges faced by women in this specific region underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions to address these issues and enhance their socioeconomic well-being. As one of the respondents, and through the focus group discussions, it has become evident that:

It's undeniable that improved road infrastructure, access to quality healthcare facilities, and fair pricing for our products in the market are essential for our community's well-being and economic empowerment. These basic necessities are vital for us to thrive and fulfill our responsibilities as caretakers of our families and stewards of our environment. While we are resilient and resourceful in managing many aspects of our lives, governmental support in addressing these fundamental needs is crucial for our collective prosperity and the preservation of our cultural heritage(Simo, 32 years old and other FGD participants).

The voices of women from Tousem village, Manipur, collectively call for government action to address the pressing needs and challenges faced by their community. Simo, a 32-year-old woman, along with other participants in focus group discussions, emphasizes the critical importance of improved road infrastructure, healthcare

facilities, and fair pricing for their products in the market. The absence of adequate road infrastructure not only hinders access to urban markets but also limits economic opportunities for women engaged in various livelihood activities such as agriculture and handicrafts (Haokip & Reimeingam, 2021). Enhanced healthcare facilities are paramount to ensure the well-being of women and children in the village, addressing prevalent health issues and providing timely medical assistance. Additionally, securing fair prices for their products in the market is essential for women to sustain their livelihoods and achieve economic independence. Beyond these immediate concerns, the women of Tousem village emphasize their commitment to preserving traditional environmental practices, recognizing the interdependence between environmental conservation and community well-being. Through their stewardship of natural resources and adherence to traditional knowledge systems, they contribute to the preservation of ecological balance for future generations. As active participants in both economic and environmental spheres, the women of Tousem village underline the need for comprehensive government support to address their multifaceted needs and empower them to thrive within their community.

To achieve comprehensive women's empowerment, a multifaceted approach is necessary. This includes targeted initiatives offering financial aid and skill development for aspiring female entrepreneurs, fostering their economic independence. Equally crucial is equipping women with modern agricultural techniques through training programs, which can significantly enhance agricultural productivity and promote sustainable practices, ultimately strengthening local economies and food security. Furthermore, educational reforms in government schools are essential, aiming to improve learning outcomes and equip women with the necessary knowledge and skills. Complementing these efforts, dedicated legal awareness programs can empower tribal women by fostering knowledge of their rights and promoting gender equality. Finally, disseminating information on existing government programs specifically amongst women is crucial, as it empowers them to access resources and support systems, ultimately improving their well-being and that of their families.

## **Conclusion**

The economic contribution of women, often overlooked in patriarchal societies, should be acknowledged and rewarded. Women in tribal and rural areas play a crucial role in supporting their families and communities but face neglect from the government, which may view them as economically unviable. This neglect is evident in inadequate infrastructure, such as poor road conditions, which hampers their ability to access markets and generate income. Despite domestic responsibilities and childcare, women display remarkable resilience, undertaking strenuous journeys with infants to ensure their families' well-being. Recognizing and supporting these women through government intervention can enhance their contributions to societal progress and foster a more inclusive and equitable society. This study highlights the economic roles of women in Tousem Village, Manipur, emphasizing their significant impact despite societal marginalization and infrastructural challenges. By challenging the

undervaluation of women's labour perpetuated by cultural norms and patriarchal structures, the research aligns with feminist perspectives advocating for gender equity and inclusive development. Addressing these issues requires a fundamental shift in societal perceptions.

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