

# Struggles and challenges of Street Women Vendors: A study in Tamenglong District, Manipur

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## **Abstract:**

Women folks of Zeliangrong whose contributions are immense and diverse in the life situation of the people need due acknowledgment and appreciation. In the society where women are treated as commodities and trapped within the domestic chores domain, the study search to empower women and accept the works and capabilities of women as a sustainable means to support the families and societies in general who stabilize the life struggle of the suffering poor families in the villages. The research thrust to study about women struggles for livelihood among Zeliangrong Nagas living in Manipur. Women who have been considered as second citizens of the society have been struggling to keep their family alive through thick and thin times; and the study shows how Zeliangrong women struggle for their livelihood through street vending.

In the society where women are treated as commodities and trapped within the domestic chores domain, the study seeks to empower women and accept the works and capabilities of women as a sustainable means to support the families and societies in general who stabilize the life struggle of the suffering poor families in the villages.

**Keywords:** Struggles, Street Vendors, Women

## **Introduction**

Generally, a woman's contribution to her home is tremendous. A house cannot run without a woman. In the traditional house, a woman does all the household chores. Rises early in the morning, fetches water from the nearby water- source like the spring or river or pond, pounds rice and cooks food for the whole family. All these works should be completed in time before the men folk get up so that, by the time they get up, they can have the food and go to the field. It is also her duty to pack lunch for them. On many occasions, she also goes to the field and contributes her part in agriculture. Even trained her daughter from her early childhood to be a responsible "*woman*" for the future and trained to look after her younger siblings, she learns to cook, wash clothes, weave, pound rice and all those chores that involve a woman.

In the state of Manipur, the per capita income of the hill people and the valley people are different due to the factors of professional natural factors, places and knowledge of the people . The per capita income

of the people of Manipur are inequality and each family's per capita income is also equal. Some of the families in the village of the hills areas of Manipur are living below poverty lines, they are still living insecure of the foods and shelter. They are living under hand to mouth conditions without any alternatives means of families income rather than agriculture production annually.

The hill people's agricultural productions are unstable and not high yielding varieties. Because they depend on natural climatic conditions and also most of the land is terrace land and rocky mountain systems. They could not produce more than they need, it is hard to produce enough food for the particular more than they need, it is hard to produce enough food for the particular year. The hill people of Manipur still continue to suffer from scarcity of food in the family because they are still using the method of traditional subsistence. The agriculture system of the hill people is based on manual labour and on natural soil formation. In fact the hills people of Manipur are mainly suffering from the scarcity of food and unavailability of their needs.

To tackle the acute problem of food security, the government of India implemented many schemes for the development of Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes, but that particular scheme which was implemented by the government of India could not reached door to door to all the villages who live in the remote area form the districts headquarter.

The socio-economic life of the villages in Manipur are very flexible because the majority of the villages of the hill district of Manipur depend on agricultural productions and also most of them are engaged in disguised unemployment.

The trend of livelihood in the Tamenglong District where the Zeliangrong community lives is a tough thing to ponder upon. Life has been stiff and management for daily bread among the poor section of the Zeliangrong community without any aid and resources from the authorities becomes a boon of contention. Especially among the women group of the Zeliangrong inhabited areas of Tamenglong, patriarchal social system being dominant and that of the capitalist system taking over the tribal mode of production, poor families have to struggle double. Not being enough to manage the daily needs of the family, women took to different courses of struggle earning their daily food and needs that necessitate for the family. Among many forms of the works and employment, the self-employment strategy of street vending became an alternative source of livelihood to feed the hungry mouths and meet daily needs.

### ***Economic life of the Research Area:***

Tamenglong District is known for its least developed district in the state. The road connectivity is at the worst, and transportation of goods from Imphal the capital of Manipur to the district is tedious work and communication facilities running at the lowest standard. In all these circumstances, women street vendors have to struggle to survive against the pathetic conditions of the district.

Tamenglong districts is rich in natural resources. The forest and the rivers which are located within the territory of Tamenglong district played a great role in the economic life of the people of Tamenglong and their main sources of income are agricultural production. About 60% are engaged in agricultural activities like horticulture, plantation and other non agricultural activities. Animals husbandry dairy farming etc are also practiced too. The people are engaged in different economic sectors. The majority of the people

are engaged in the primary sector. The method of shifting cultivation is, a piece of forest land cleared by cutting and burning when the soil gets exhausted. The farmer moves to a new site for cultivation. It is also known as slash and burn agriculture. In this type of farming, the farmer does not use fertiliser or other modern input. So productivity is low, this type of farming is shifted every year from place to place because of searching the fertility area. The agriculture cycle of Tamenglong district before two decades was 10 to 15 years but now it has decreased due to increased population and cultivation land are utilised in different ways i.e. some parts of land are converted into village or town and construction of road and railway, overgrazing, cutting timber and other natural factors. So now the maximum agricultural cycle of Tamenglong is 5 to 10 years. The shifting cultivation productivity is mainly based on the year of the agricultural cycle. The kharif crops are mainly grown and this is the most suitable cropping season for the Tamenglong district. Some of the common crops are rice, maize, yam, barley, peas, gram, mustard, brinjal, jowar, cotton groundnut, soyabean and pulses etc. important crops and fruits like mango, guava, lemon orange and pineapple are also found.

The research thrust to study about women struggles for livelihood among Zeliangrong Nagas living in Manipur. Women who have been considered as second citizens of the society have been struggling to keep their family alive through thick and thin times; and the study shows how Zeliangrong women struggle for their livelihood through street vending. There are 600 Zeliangrong villages approximately spread over Assam, Manipur and Nagaland. In Manipur alone there are about 300 villages of Zeliangrong. Briefing the economy of the Zeliangrong Nagas, very few households of Zeliangrong have water paddy fields and some continue to depend on Shifting Cultivation. Few products of the field are taken to the market to be sold. Some groups of people depend on forest products, such as fetch-folding of banana leaves, gathering wild mushrooms, edible leaves and fruits etc to support their families' livelihood. Most of the products gathered are not eaten by the family alone, but they are carried to the National Highways and Market to be sold.

Forests are the wealth of the people. The land possesses several rivers such as Barak, Irang, Makhu and Jiri which are large enough for fishing grounds and they also enriched the soil for cultivation. The method of cultivation is confined to Jhum cultivation and terrace cropping.

Traditionally, every woman must know the art of weaving and each one is responsible for adequate supplies of clothes for the family. The economic life of the people depends on forest resources such as timber, bamboo, cane, cinnamon etc. Even the forefathers of these people had been experiencing the same business since time immemorial. Tea has become one of the most important products of this area and a source of income for the people. Keeping poultry and other domestic animals is part of living in every home.

The population of Tamenglong about 75% per cent are living in the villages from 5 to 25 kms of the district headquarter and the remaining 25% percent of the population are living in the district headquarter and in the small bazar of Tamei (Sub-division of Tamenglong), Nungba (Sub-division of Tamenglong) and the villages which are located on the side of National Highway No.53. They have their alternative means of earning and they are relatively advanced in education, politics and other fields.

However, for people living in the villages far away from the district headquarters and in small towns like *Nungba Kaithel*, *Tamei Kaithel* and *Noney Kaithel* are facing acute food insecurity.

The study attempts to make a thorough, comprehensive and analytical research by exploring the impact of educated women vendors and uneducated women vendors on how far they manage their business and economic status, self – sufficient, education of their children and social role. The research outcomes may improve the condition of the women vendors of Zeliangrong i.e., their problems, their day-to-day obstacles, their financial shortage and inconveniences of their children's education. Zeliangrong women survive independently and courageously face every challenge of living. R. Brown, the political agent of the British, gave a description of women vendors as, *"Many of them (women) walk miles in the morning, buy things from distant villages and sell it in the capital market in the evening. In the evening, the women were hurrying along with wares on their heads and little babies slung on their backs"*. This statement gives a beautiful picture of women's bravery, hardworking and love of their children. Hence, the present research aims to study the women street vendors and its implications on their livelihood and women vendors how far they manage their business and economic status, self-sufficient education of their children and social role.

## Research Methodology

**Aim of the Research:** To reveal the problems for solution through policy implementation. The aims and objectives of the studies are to locate the real struggle of the women folks in sustaining the economy and livelihood of the families and as the backbone of the society. The study also aims to empower women and portray the abilities of women in the whelming chauvinistic patriarchal society in the struggle for livelihood and Food security.

## Objectives:

1. To determine the struggles of Women vendors.
2. To study how women are empowered through street vending.
3. To understand how women sustain the economy of the society.

The present study was conducted through a survey method on the random sample of 200 women vendors, composed of literate and illiterate women vendors selected from four sectors of Tamenglong District The methodology of the proposed work descriptive and analytical etc.

**Coverage:** The coverage of the work will be based on the fact findings within the Women Street vendors and hawkers of Zeliangrong community in Manipur and suggestions.

**Data analysis:** Data were carefully examined, verified in various steps. For the study purpose combinations of qualitative and quantitative methods were used, namely Interview, observation, case studies, questionnaire, empirical etc. Case studies were also used as base tools for data collection for the study. The primary data was collected by using an interview schedule. Besides this, all relevant,

secondary data was collected from literature, websites, journals, articles in concerned fields and key informants from different areas. Good support was provided by all informants.

### **Scope and Limitation:**

The research has been done within the scope of Zeliangrong womenfolk in Manipur and limits especially to women who are involved in street vending and Hawking. The research has been done only based on the Zeliangrong women who reside in Manipur state of India taking special consideration to Tamenglong district of Manipur.

### **Significance of the Study:**

The importance of the study is to dig out the real life situation of Zeliangrong women in the struggle for livelihood and food security. Women folks of Zeliangrong whose contributions are immense and diverse in the life situation of the people need due acknowledgment and appreciation. In the society where women are treated as commodities and trapped within the domestic chores domain, the study seeks to empower women and accept the works and capabilities of women as a sustainable means to support the families and societies in general who stabilize the life struggle of the suffering poor families in the villages.

### **Result and Analysis**

There are women vendors of different ages in the Market mostly starting from 30 to above 70 years of age. These above 70 year old women can also actively manage their business. Majority of the women vendors have trade experience of 10/20 years. The women vendors have low profit in their vending business. They are mostly doom in debt. They have no idea of a savings account because of their low profit of their business and it is hard for them to save. They save money in the form of thrift (*Marup*) but that is also a low amount. Most of the women vendors take loans from the private sector and no agency or government help has ever been there for them. And those who are taking loans from the private sector have to pay high interest. Most of the women vendors are poor and if they pay high interest there will be no improvement in the business. Educated women vendors can invest and plan their vending business properly than the uneducated women vendors. The educated women vendors can easily communicate with different types of customers and can also convince them to buy their commodities. They also discuss and solve the problems of others by making a good relationship. So, education is essential in every field of life. The women vendors are not satisfied with their business because of the low profit. The income they got from the business is not sufficient to fulfill the needs and demands of their family. But still they have to continue as there is no other option.

### **Children Education**

From the study found that education is a must and its part and parcel of a happy life. Without education it will not be fit to survive. They are deeply concerned about their children's education.

Most of the children of women vendors are studying in the private schools in spite of their low income; they want to give the best of education to their children. The women vendors of Zeliangrong Women

are active in social activities too. The women vendors, as a collective body, always act as a force on issues concerning the social, economic and political life of the people of Manipur. They try to protect not only the interest of their families but also the interest of the community at large.

Majority of the women vendors are not fully aware of the marketing system and trading. They are needed to give proper awareness programmes in order to improve trading and marketing. Women vendors who are sitting at the roadside also face the same as those who are sitting at the shed. If the government made proper policy and programmes for these roadside women vendors the day-to-day problems that are facing both the women vendors and public will be reduced to a large extent.

Government agencies need to take initiatives in their role for the development of women vendors and if there is cooperation among the women vendors, and women vendors with government agencies their condition will improve obviously.

As women play a very important role in society, there needs to be an improvement in the knowledge of women in every field of life. The women vendors should be given proper awareness socially, politically and most importantly educationally.

Most of the women vendors are not aware of the family planning. They should be given family planning awareness in order to improve their status and control population explosion. Though some women of Zeliangrong are literate but majority of them are illiterate. The government needs special programmes for education like adult education for these illiterate women vendors.

## **Women in Economy**

In the patriarchal family system of the Zeliangrong with the father as the head of the family, the father primary concern is to see that his wife and children live comfortably under his care and protection by earning money to ensure their welfare.

However it is not men alone who earns money, women are also one of the important assets for the family's economical life. He is the major bread earner in that she is the hardest worker in Jhum cultivation, the major occupation of the community.

Men and women work together in Jhum fields as well as in many other places of earning but women labourers are paid less than in many instances. In the past, women and men both used to travel to places like Imphal and Silchar with oranges for bartering with salt, ornaments, implements and tools and many other essential commodities.

In the present economic system, the woman also earns money and brings many essential commodities to supplement her husband's income. She is skillful in weaving by which she provides warmth for her family. She also rears domestic fowls and animals separately so that they can be sold or exchanged for money or labour for the family. She gets money by selling her clothes, vegetables and other crops in the field or forests.

One recent mode of women's contribution to the family's economy is through Self Help Groups. By forming their own SHGs, the women are generating their own income and helping one another by lending money within the group at low interest. Many women are engaged in commercial and business activities and small-scale industries like sewing, weaving, knitting, soap making, etc. and supporting their



families. Participation of women in modern ways of earning is increasing. More and more women are involved in government services as well as in private sectors. Many young women are working in the cities to support themselves and even their family members. Few women have bought *pattas*, a plot of land for themselves out of their income.

On the other side of the picture, women are still living in poverty, ignorance and backwardness in spite of their availability to good communication and transport facilities. The women were asked what their biggest problems are today. Many responded that their inability to be free from the bondage of preparing and being a housewife and selling rice beer which is spoiling their health and eyesight staying near the fire even in hot climate is the biggest kind of oppression which the men folk do not allow them to give up.

### **Tamenglong Kaithel**

Tamenglong proper is the place where it lays the biggest market within the District of Tamenglong where the Zeliangrong inhabit. People of all walks of life flocked to the market every day. The market is governed by a group of women who look after the functioning of the market. The market is a temporary setup with no proper facilities of security, exclusively run by women. This market is the nerve center of major social and economic activities. It is the place where women traders transact the business of local agricultural produce and other essential commodities. Women commuters come to the market from different places daily to participate in the commercial activities.

This is the market where women realize their dream a little from their pathetic conditions of life. It is a place of valuing themselves from their poor setup and background. There is also a serenity of dignity maintained within the market among the women. The aura and beauty of this market is seen through their liveliness of gossip, conversation, singing, giggling and mingling among women to create a room of relaxation. It is a place where they draw inspiration and strength making it a sacred place where they adore the challenges they face.

### **Tamei Kaithel**

Tamei subdivision lies in the eastern part of Tamenglong which is 35 km away from Tamenglong Headquarter. The main market of Tamei is just 200 feet approximately. It is thinly populated. The women vendors of Tamei do not sit as vendors in the town of Tamei, but would load their products and take them to Imphal which is 85 km away and some would take them to Tamenglong headquarters to sell their products.

Few vehicles ply on the road as passenger vehicles. Most of the women who do small business would take their goods to the bigger market early in the morning by bus and other vehicles that ply on the road. Tamei town has a particular market day; on this market day; Tuesday, Wednesday and Saturday, women vendors around the neighbouring villages would flock to the town early in the morning to have their sale. These are the particular set days where women street vendors would take their chance that cannot go to other towns to do their business.

**Longmai Kaithel**

Longmai town is a hub of business, the buzzing sight of people around the market of Longmai is a phenomenal site to see. Longmai Kaithel is 63 Kilometers away from Imphal along the National Highway 37 which runs through the town. It is situated in Tamenglong District. It is a small town where the Zeliangrong community lives. Women street vendors have a small space in the middle of the market where the Bazaar Board had built it for business and other local purposes.

There is also no specific site or street for women vendors to sell their goods and produce. Any roadside in the street became a vending place. There are women who come from far flung villages who had no proper place and permanent site to sell their products in this Longmai Bazaar.

This market serves as a place for women to support their families, and other social and economic needs. Women would come to this market to do business and know the political scenario of the local areas. The beauty of this market run by women serves in many ways, in people's movement, nisha bandh(women's activism combating alcoholism and drug addiction), and a site for Zeliangrong film shooting.

**Nungba Kaithel**

Nungba market shed rest in the middle of the town of Nungba where National Highway 37 runs through the town. It is a small town where women and people from all walks of life come and do small businesses for their living. The sight of the people doing business is an interesting thing for the onlookers.

Early in the morning women from different villages come to the market to sell their goods till the setting of the sun. Women from villages come carrying their produce from the field and forest to be sold in the market. Varieties of vegetables are brought to the market for their sale. These women who come to the market would sell to their customers instantly or sit at the roadside and wait for their buyers to come by. These are small earnings which they make to keep their family livelihood running. Mothers, daughters and old women would come in a queue talking of their works and related matters on their way to the market. After their sale, they would go back to their villages with some domestic needs bought from the market.

The market shed of Nungba is a small shed built. It is all occupied by women and run by the women to do their business. Women mostly occupied the whole of market business role where scanty men are seen

doing business for their living.

**Reasons for Participating in Street Vending**

The reasons for street vending comprises economic pressures, poverty alleviation and other livelihood implications. Economic pressures are those pertaining to meeting the daily intake of food of the families within the Zeliangrong community, for they live hand to mouth and to meet the day both ends. Poverty alleviation comprises the basic necessities and longing for better living. To raise the living standard of the families and meet the social demands. Other livelihood implications include all the growing needs of the family ranging from food, clothing, shelter, education, health etc.



The other reasons which are non-financial includes, shortage of employment facilities in the organized sector where poor cannot afford the facilities and opportunities toppled by the rich.

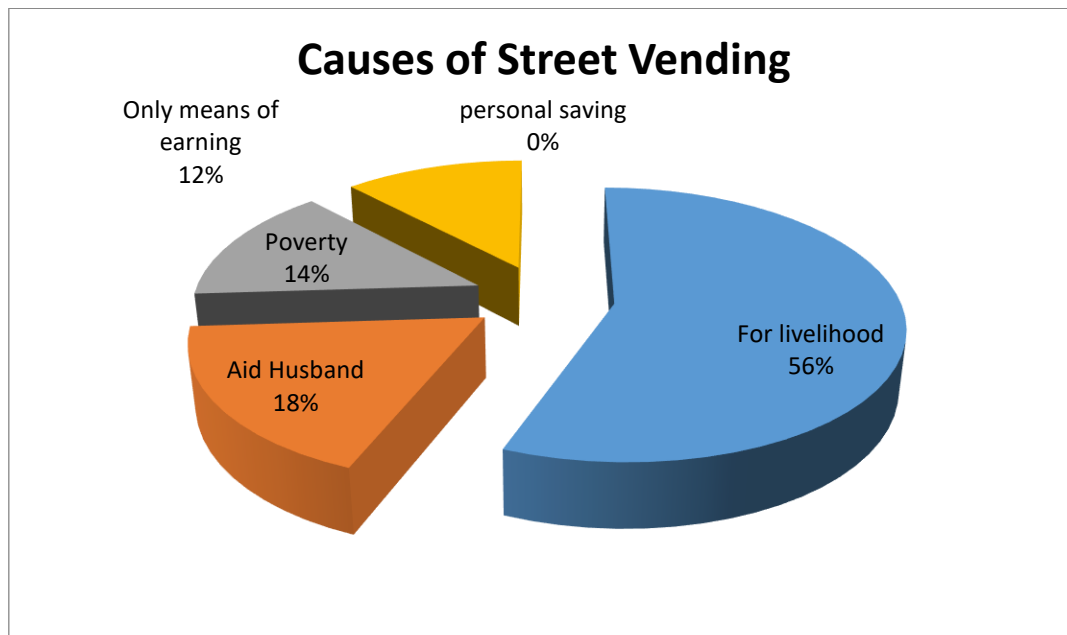
- Majority of Zeliangrong women worked in unorganized sectors for low wages due to low level of skills, illiteracy, ignorance and surplus labor and they faced high levels of exploitation. The constitution of India guarantees rights to equality and opportunity in employment and directs the state to secure equal rights for livelihood, and equal pay equal work. Despite the concerted effort of the state, the economic status of women is lagging far behind. Women worked the most and they earned the least in life. The additional social responsibility shouldered by them, their subordinate status in society, patriarchal family set up, socio-economic backwardness, proneness for occupation in the unorganized sector with low productivity and marginalization in employment opportunities account for their poor or low earning capacity.
- Women entered the market as wage earners but occupied secondary positions in the labor workforce. They entered the labor market only when the economic compulsions forced them to supplement the meager family earnings.<sup>1</sup> This kind of women's work as a supplementary force in the family has made them susceptible to all kinds of discriminatory treatment and exploitation in the field of employment. Women's contribution to the economy by and large remains unorganized, yet their services are valuable.<sup>2</sup>
- Most of the Zeliangrong women working in the unorganized sector are characterized by wage discrimination of men and women, lack of job security, no minimum wages, heavy physical work, and lack of minimum facilities at the workplace. They are outside the reach of Protective Labor Laws and Trade Union Organizations. They hardly have any opportunities to improve their income because female's works are generally labored in unskilled occupation.
- Most of the Zeliangrong women who worked in the unorganized sector do not have year round employment. They suffer drastic disadvantages compared to men in their search for employment opportunities. Though Unorganized Workers Social Security Act, 2008 which was passed to provide for the social security and welfare of unorganized workers, women workers who lived in the far flung villages do not have any awareness and knowledge about it. According to this Act, the Central Government shall formulate suitable welfare schemes for unorganized workers on matters relating to life and disability cover, health and maternity facility, skill up gradation of workers etc.

#### **Distribution of Women Street Vendors in Causes of Street Vending**

1. For livelihood=56%=112
2. To aid husbands struggle=18%=36
3. Poverty=14%=28
4. Only means of earning=12%=24
5. Personal saving=0

<sup>1</sup> Vandana Dave, "Women Workers in Unorganized Sectors", in Women's Link, Vol. 18, No. 3, (Kurukshetra:WSRC, Kurukshetra University, 2012), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 9.



**Figures:1 Causes of street vending**

Women took to street vending for many reasons. There are various reasons out of which some of them are outlined to know the causes.

First it is seen from the table that, maximum of the women street vendors who sit by the roadside selling their goods and products do for their livelihood purpose of which 56% women plainly respond to the query being asked upon them.

Secondly, some women still do believe that their husbands is the head of the family and they are the breadwinners, and they deem to focus that they do street vending to aid the income of their husbands, out of which the patriarchal mindset still dominates them and of which 18% in strength comes in the second place.

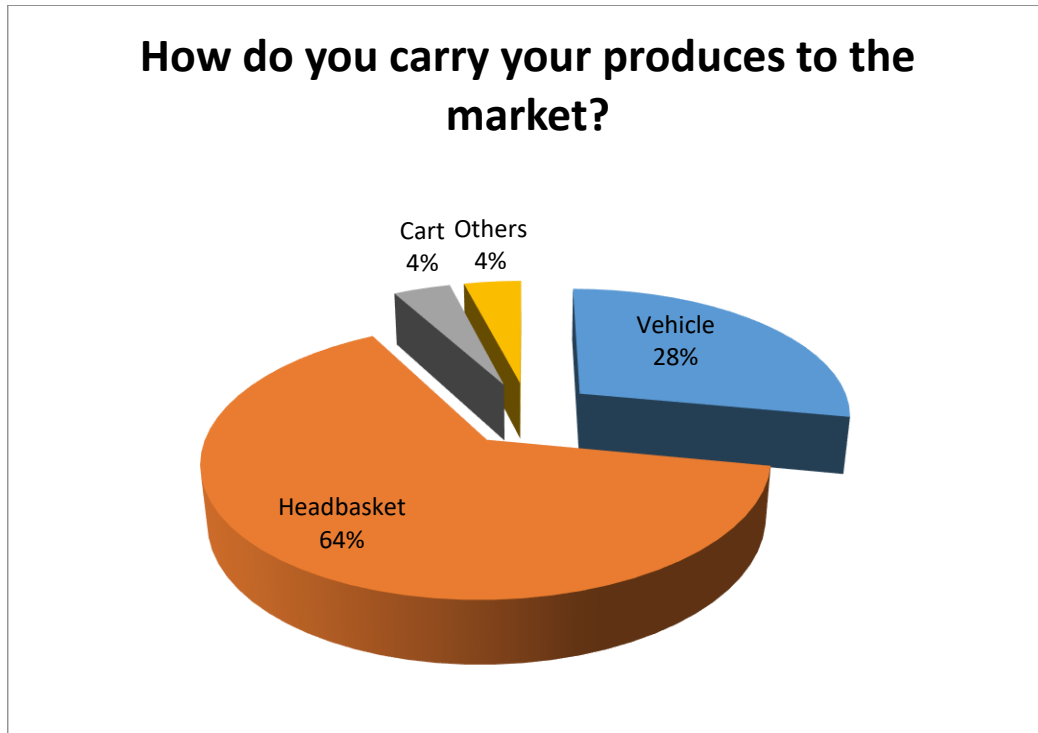
Women who said the cause of street vending for them was poverty came in third place with 14%. Poverty-stricken areas of rural villages have very less chance of earning while women do not have capitals to invest and loans to be taken. After their struggle for their daily needs, seeking work and earning in different places couldn't help them either because of their lack of skills and entrepreneurship, they resort to street vending which is the only means of earning comes in fourth place which is 12%.

Women who struggle in the street as vendors gave out everything for their kids and family. They do not have much to save in their bank accounts. The causes are some of the common factors prevailing in the locality of Tamenglong District.

## Distribution of Women Street Vendors in Transporting their Produces

1. Vehicle=28%=56
2. Head basket=64%=128
3. Cart=4%=8

4. Others=4%=8



**Figure :2 Women transporting their product**

We have seen from above table (fig 4.3) how women transport their products to the street and market for their sale. These poor women cannot afford to transport their items in vehicles for various reasons; Lack of transport facilities, non connectivity of road, high vehicle fare, etc.

In the table shown above, first, women street vendors carry their items to the street vending site and market in their head-basket which is a traditional way of transporting goods and items. They cannot carry much and they have very little chance to have high sales. 64% of women travel by foot and carry their products to the market. Since the availability of a transport system in the hills and underdeveloped districts like Tamenglong is rarely seen.

Secondly, there are women who have bigger sales and became a wholesome buyer of goods from the villagers, who would collect on a smaller scale to have bigger business in street vending, mostly using vehicles to transport their goods to the market. 28% of women were found using vehicles as a means of transport. Why do they use vehicles and the opportunity to use vehicles should have a reality check. These little bigger scale women vendors collect goods from the small scale women street vendors and hawkers, who brought to the market carrying in a head-basket.

Thirdly, there are women who use carts as a means of transporting their goods to the market. 4% of these women who live nearby the main road/ Highways have the opportunity to use their cart as a means of transport.

Fourthly, there are women who use all the methods of transporting their goods to the market, by the help of a porter, through head-basket, cart and vehicle and this category of 'Other' also has 4% in counting.

### Conclusion

Street vendors who employed themselves have to struggle for their everyday domestic utilities. Women have to cope up the double role of being a mother and a vendor. Working for the family's economic welfare and raising their children and sending them to school have been a hard job.

Street vending has been a rescue to many poor travellers and passer-by who could not afford to buy costly food and items. Yet, in the Zeliangrong areas, fresh and organic food and vegetables are available through street vending only. The type of food and nutrition acquired through street vending is healthy and precious. Street vending has been a platform to equip oneself in cultivating social networking, culturally, building communication skills and learning etiquettes.

What we need to do is to enter into concrete life situations and take people seriously in their particular context, with their particular problems and outlook. At the same time we are forced by social reality to look at the larger context to which people are connected. Many women street vendors come from their villages and they are in touch with the forest from which the tribal people belonged.

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