

Polygamy: One of the Topmost Constraints for Women of Arunachal Pradesh Being Underpowered

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Abstract

Any person who has power or has enough confidence to give and take decision and influence other in a particular matter is Empowerment. Women have always put their best efforts to influence the environment and expand their space as mother, wives and workers, but due to patriarchal ideology, where the status of women is kept lower than men, women are prevented in doing so. Thus the process of gaining control over self, ideology and the resources which determine power may be known as women empowerment. No doubt unlike other society the women folk in Arunachal tribal society shares respectable status and rights with men folks, but sadly when it comes to Do's & Do not's, women folk have been always forced to follow the rules set by the men folks. For instance Polygamy and its frequencies in Arunachal Pradesh have been always getting positive supports from some parts or other. Even many of the parts still encourage such practices of men by giving statement like 'It is manlier to have more than one wife. Is this really an equal status society? Are we women really empowered? Are we women really awakened?

Let this paper be the platform to respond these burning issues, which is one of the top most constraints behind women of Arunachal Pradesh being under powered.

Keywords: Empowerment, Influence, Patriarchal, Status, Polygamy, Constraints

Introduction:

Women empowerment means emancipation of women from the vicious grips of social, economical, political, caste and gender based discrimination. It means granting women the freedom to make life, choices; women empowerment does not mean 'defying women' rather it means replacing patriarchy with parity. In this regard, there are various facets of women empowerment, such as given here under: Social Women Empowerment, Educational Women Empowerment, Economic and Occupational Empowerment, Legal Women Empowerment, Political Women Empowerment to mention a few.

Swami Vivekananda, one of the greatest sons of India, quoted that, "There is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved, it is not possible for a bird to fly on only one wing". Therefore, the inclusion of 'Women Empowerment' as one of the prime goals in the eight Millennium Development Goals underscores the relevance of this fact. Thus, in order to achieve the status of a developed country, India needs to transform its colossal women force into an effective human resource and this is possible only through the empowerment of women. Empowering women to participate fully in economic life across all sectors is essential to building stronger economies, achieve

internationally agreed goals for development and sustainability and improve the quality of life for women, men, families and communities.

Malala Yousafzai once said, there is no denying the fact that women in India have made a considerable progress in almost seven decades of independence, but still have to struggle against many handicaps and social evils in the male dominated society. Many evil and masculine forces still prevail in the modern Indian society that resists the forward recently acclaimed the status of the first Asian country to accomplish its Mars Mission in the maiden attempt, is positioned at the 29th rank among 146 countries across the globe on the basis of Gender Inequality Index. There has been amelioration in the position of women, but their true empowerment is still awaited.

Why need of women empowerment?

The most famous saying said by the Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru is “To awaken the people, it is the women who must be awakened. Once she is on the move, the family moves, the village moves, the nation moves”. In India, to empower the women, first it needs to kill all the demons killing women’s rights and values in the society such as dowry system, illiteracy, sexual harassment, inequality, female infanticide, domestic violence against women, rape, prostitution, illegal trafficking and other issues. Gender discrimination in the nation brings cultural, social, economic and educational differences which push country back. The most effective remedy to kill such devils is making women empowerment by ensuring the right to Equality mentioned in the constitution of India.

Women’s empowerment is the way or a social action in which women elaborate and recreate what it is to be in a circumstance that they previously were denied. Empowerment can be defined in many ways, however, when talking about women’s empowerment, empowerment means accepting and allowing people (women) who are on the outside of the decision making process into it. “This puts a strong emphasis on participation in political structures and formal decision making and in the economic sphere, on the ability to obtain an income that enables participation in economic decision making. Empowerment is the process that creates power in individuals over their own lives, society, and in their communities. People are empowered when they are able to access the opportunities available to them without limitations and restrictions such as in education, profession and lifestyle. Feeling entitled to make your own decisions creates a sense of empowerment. Empowerment includes the action of raising the status of women through education, raising awareness, literature and training. Women’s empowerment is all about equipping and allowing women to make life determining decisions through the different problems in society.

Alternatively, it is the process for women to redefine gender roles that allows for them to acquire the ability to choose between known alternatives that have otherwise been restricted from such ability. There are several principles defining women’s empowerment such as, for one to be empowered, they must come from a position of disempowerment. Furthermore, one must acquire empowerment themselves rather than have it given to them by an external party. Other studies have found that empowerment definitions entail people having the capability to make important decisions in their lives while also being able to act on them. Lastly, empowerment and disempowerment is relative to other at a previous time; therefore, empowerment is a process not a product.

Women empowerment has become a significant topic of discussion in development and economics. It can also point to the approaches regarding other trivialized genders in a particular or social context.

Women's economic empowerment refers to the ability for women to enjoy their right to control and benefit from the resources, assets, income and their own time, as well as the ability to manage risk and improve their economic status and well being.

While often interchangeably used, the more comprehensive concept of gender empowerment refers to people of any gender, stressing the distinction between biological and gender as a role.

Entire nations, businesses, communities and groups can benefit from the implementation of programs and policies that adopt the notion of women empowerment. Empowerment of women is a necessity for the very development of a society, since it enhances both the quality and the quantity of human resources available for development. Empowerment is one of the main procedural concerns when addressing human rights and development.

Women's empowerment and achieving gender equality is essential for our society to ensure the sustainable development of the country. Many world leaders and scholars have argued that sustainable development is impossible without gender equality and women's empowerment. Sustainable development accepts environmental protection, social and economic development, and without women's empowerment, women wouldn't feel equally important to the process of development as men. It is widely believed that, the full participation of both men and women is critical for development. Only acknowledging men's participation will not be beneficial to sustainable development. In the context of women and development, empowerment must include more choices for women to make on their own. Without gender equality and empowerment, the country could not be just and social change wouldn't occur. Therefore, scholars agree that women's empowerment plays a huge role in development and is one of the significant contributions of development. Without the equal inclusion of women in development, women would not be able to benefit or contribute to the development of the country.

As per census of India (2011), the sex ratio in India is 940 female 1000 males. Sex ratio of India as per 2019, India has 49,314,062 more male population than female population. As of 2020, below 65- 69 age group, India has more male than female. Below 24 year population, there are 11 more males per 1000 females. Female population is almost double above 100 year. Amongst states, Kerala has highest sex ratio of 1084 females to 1000 males and Haryana has the lowest sex ratio of 879 females per 1000 males. Among Union territories, Pondicherry has highest sex ratio of 1037 and Daman & Diu has lowest sex ratio of 618.

Historical Relevance of Polygamy in Arunachal Pradesh:

Before the introduction of civilized society in Arunachal Pradesh, Nomadic life existed during the early tribal days where having bigger family/more members in family shows high status/power in the society. Also the relevance of polygamy has been observed in the olden tribal families where they regarded polygamy as providing helping hands to their spouses. Household chores take more time and energy, so to take care of children as well as family, even the spouses encouraged polygamy. Hence since history polygamy has its relevance in tribal society of Arunachal Pradesh.

The most common ideology the people of state have is one must have male child to continue his family chain and if one doesn't give birth to a male child, polygamy is socially encouraged. This vary ideology have been followed since history and still being followed by the so called modern educated man/society.

Relevance of Polygamy in the Present Time:

Arunachal Pradesh being a state where there is no gender bias or gender inequality meanwhile we also

cannot deny with the fact that women here do faces several difficulties and problems to which polygamy/bigamy ranks top among those. Since history polygamy have been encouraged by considering it as a symbol of adding more power to the family. But the saddest part about the evil practice is that during those days most of the members were uneducated who obviously had no idea about the level of its consequences. With the advancement of time and development of society, education elited the members but polygamy still finds some smooth path in the society.

Though the modern society has been introduced many organizations and department for the women, but still very few women dares to stand against the evil practice. Below the collected data aptly highlight the status of the present Arunachal.

Table 1.1: Representing cases registered under APSCW on Polygamy/Bigamy

Year	No. of Registered Cases
2005 – 2006 & 2015- 2016	69
2017	06
2018	Nil
Total	75

Source: APSCW Annual Report 2015 – 2016, 2016 – 2017 & 2017 – 2018.

From the collected data on registered cases to the APSCW (Arunachal Pradesh State Commission for Women) during 2005 – 2006 to 2015 -2016, it has been found that polygamy & bigamy ranked in 3rd position by accounting 69 cases in total after domestic violence (261 cases) and child marriage (158 cases). From the latest data on polygamy, it has been found that only 6 cases (2 Bigamy and 4 polygamy) have been registered in APSCW in the year 2017 and no cases has been registered in the year 2018.

Polygamy and bigamy in Arunachal Pradesh sit at a complex intersection of law, culture and gender justice. Though under mainstream Indian law (Hindu Marriage Act 1955 and Special Marriage Act 1954), polygamy and bigamy are illegal for Hindus, Jains, Buddhists and Sikhs and same is valid only for Muslims under their personal law. Arunachal being home to many tribal communities who still are under their customary practices and beliefs often recognizes or tolerates polygamy/bigamy despite national law under customary ground which in the modern civilized society is unacceptable.

The Arunachal Pradesh Women’s Welfare Society (APWWS) has been vocal since 2019, urging legislation to prohibit polygamy and bigamy, protect tribal women and promote monogamy-especially among the literate group (the one knowing the law). In April 2024, APWWS appealed to the Governor to ban polygamy and bigamy and highlighted links like domestic violence and even homicides (Arunachal Times, 8 April2024). In February 2025again urged urgent action citing rising crimes against women and calling for APSCW’s intervention (Arunachal Times, 5 Feb 2025). The APSCW has repeatedly condemned public defense of polygamy by leaders, calling it harmful to women’s empowerment and equality (India Today NE).

A proposed “Monogamy Election Eligibility Bill 2023” sought to ban polygamous individuals from running for elected office but the bill has not progressed to be debate or vote.

As of mid-2025, no specific state law bans polygamy or bigamy in Arunachal Pradesh> The matter remains governed by a miz of central statutory law (for some citizens) and tribal customary practices

(Arunachal Times, 7 March 2025). Efforts from advocacy are still ongoing but legislative action at the state level is yet to materialize.

It can be concluded by saying that though legally polygamy is broadly prohibited in India for non-Muslims but the tribal customary law in Arunachal continues to enable it. And a bill targeting polygamous candidates in elections exists, but has not progressed and remains unlawful to punish polygamy specifically in the state as of mid-2025.

Polygamy plays a direct and damaging role in the disempowerment of women in Arunachal Pradesh, especially within tribal communities where it is culturally tolerated or accepted. Here's a focused analysis of how polygamy contributes to the systemic underpowering of women:

- **Polygamy as a tool of patriarchy.**
- In many tribes of Arunachal, men marrying multiple wives are often seen as a sign of status, wealth or power.
- Women on the other hand are expected to be obedient, submissive and tolerant even if they are neglected or mistreated.
- This creates a system where men control relationships, property and decision while women have limited agency.
- **Emotional and Psychological impact on women**
- First wives often feel rejected, humiliated or emotionally abandoned when their husbands marry again.
- Co-wives may face jealousy, rivalry or household conflicts leading to a toxic environment.
- Children of different wives sometimes face inequality or discrimination, impacting their growth and education.
- **Economic Disempowerment**
- In polygamous households, resources (money, land, food etc) are divided among many dependents and wives are often economically dependents on the husbands.
- If the man favors one wife over another, the neglected wife may lack food security, education for her children or healthcare.
- No clear property rights for women under tribal customary law often leaves them vulnerable after divorce or abandonment.
- **Legal vulnerability & Lack of Protection**
- Under customary laws, women in polygamous relationships rarely have legal resource.
- National laws like the Hindu Marriage Act (which bans bigamy) often don't apply uniformly to tribal populations.
- Many normalizing polygamy, society sends the message that a woman is replaceable or secondary to a man's desires.
- This undermines gender equality, limits women's self worth and discourages education and independence.
- It also reduces women's political and social voice, especially when leaders or influencers practice or justify polygamy publicly.

The Arunachal Pradesh Women's Welfare Society (APWWS) and the State Commission for Women (APSCW) have publicly condemned polygamy for- increasing domestic violence, leading to mental health issues and preventing women's participation in public life.

Polygamy must be addressed not only as a social issue but as a form of gender based violence (APWWS 2024).

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