

The Changing Role of Women in Naga Society: From Traditional Roles to Contemporary Realities

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Abstract

Women in Naga society have historically occupied a paradoxical position: widely celebrated in public discourse as “free” and respected, yet structurally excluded from key arenas of decision-making and resource control. Drawing on anthropological, historical, legal, and gender studies scholarship, this review traces continuities and changes in Naga women’s roles from the pre-colonial period to the present. It first outlines traditional social organization, gendered divisions of labour, and the symbolic and institutional separation of male and female spheres. It then analyses the impact of colonial administration, Christian missions, and the codification of customary law, including the special constitutional status of Nagaland under Article 371A, in entrenching androcentric authority. The review examines contemporary transformations associated with women’s education, market integration, self-help groups (SHGs), migration, and civil society activism, highlighting how women’s organizations and feminist critiques of “custom” have generated new spaces of agency as well as backlash. Case material from Ao and Khamniungan communities illustrates the lived contradictions between the myth of Naga egalitarianism and the everyday realities of patriarchal customary law and practice. Situating Nagaland within wider debates on customary law and women’s rights in India and beyond, the paper concludes that Naga women’s changing roles reflect not a linear transition from “tradition” to “modernity,” but an ongoing, contested negotiation shaped by the interaction of indigenous norms, state law, Christian institutions, peace politics, and globalizing cultural and economic forces [1–3].

Keywords: Naga women, customary law, patriarchy, self-help groups, Article 371A, political representation, Ao Naga, Northeast India.

1. Introduction

The Nagas are an umbrella category of ethno-linguistic groups inhabiting the present-day state of Nagaland and adjoining areas of Assam, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, and north-western Myanmar. Colonial ethnographies and early postcolonial writings often depicted Naga villages as small “democratic” republics and Naga women as enjoying high status relative to women in caste-Hindu societies, emphasizing their apparent freedom of movement, absence of purdah, and active participation in agrarian labour [4,5]. These representations have fed into a powerful self-image of Naga society as egalitarian and gender-fair and into popular claims that “equality is our tradition” [4].

However, recent scholarship complicates this romanticized picture. Gender-focused studies show that despite women’s visible economic and community roles, patriarchy is deeply embedded in Naga

customary law and institutions, relegating women to subordinate positions in matters of land, inheritance, political representation, and juridical authority [6–9]. At the same time, processes of Christianisation, education, the monetization of the economy, and civil society mobilization have opened new, if uneven, opportunities for women to claim economic, social, and political agency [5,10,11].

This review synthesises key strands of literature on gender in Naga society, with particular attention to (a) women's roles in traditional social organisation; (b) the impact of colonialism, Christianity and the codification of customary law; (c) contemporary socio-economic transformations, including SHGs, migration and urbanisation; and (d) struggles around political representation, constitutional safeguards and feminist re-interpretations of “custom.” Where relevant, it illustrates broader patterns through more detailed references to Ao and Khamniungan contexts without claiming to exhaust the diversity of all Naga communities.

2. Traditional Naga Society and Gendered Roles

2.1 Social organisation, descent and authority

Most Naga societies are patrilineal and patrilocal: clan membership, lineage identity, and inheritance rights pass through men, and women move to their husbands' households after marriage [5]. This structure has historically organized access to land, ritual positions, and political offices. Village councils, councils of elders, and age-grade institutions are overwhelmingly male domains tasked with decision-making regarding warfare (historically), alliances, land allocation, fines, and dispute settlement [7,9].

In Ao Naga society, for instance, bodies such as the Putu Menden (Council of Elders) and related forums that deliberate on community affairs have traditionally been restricted to adult males. Women are indispensable to agrarian production and family welfare but are structurally excluded from these formal decision-making arenas [4,5]. Similar patterns of androcentric authority are documented across Angami, Sema, Lotha, and other tribes, where councils and village courts are composed almost exclusively of male elders [1,9].

2.2 Gendered division of labour and property

Ethnographic and historical accounts consistently point to a pronounced but ideologically framed “complementary” division of labour. Women undertake labour-intensive tasks in shifting cultivation (jhum) and wet rice terrace agriculture, such as sowing, weeding, transplanting, harvesting, and post-harvest processing; they also collect fuelwood and forest produce, care for livestock, weave textiles, and maintain the household [5]. Men are primarily associated with initial forest clearance, house and granary construction, ritual and political roles, and, in the past, warfare and long-distance hunting [7].

Despite women's central role in sustaining livelihoods and food security, rights over land and other immovable properties are usually vested in male lineage members. Daughters rarely inherit ancestral land; widows' rights are mediated through sons or affinal male kin; and women may lose access to land upon divorce [12,1,9]. This disjuncture between economic contributions and property rights is a core axis of gender inequality in traditional Naga society.

2.3 The morung and the public-private divide

The morung (bachelor's dormitory, under various local names) is a key male institution in many Naga communities. It functions as a space for the socialization of young men into communal norms, warfare, ritual knowledge, and political responsibility. Feminist readings of the morung emphasize its function as an exclusionary public sphere: girls and women are barred from entry, and many oral narratives explicitly justify this exclusion as taboo or sinful [7,9]. Thus, the morung materializes a gendered division between

public/communal authority (male) and domestic/reproductive domains (female), legitimizing men's privileged access to deliberative spaces and ritual power [6,1].

While women participate in community work, feasts, songs, and rituals, they do so within the boundaries set by male elders and ritual specialists. Their visibility does not translate into a formalized voice or vote in decisions that affect land, conflict, or village relationships [4,5].

3. Colonialism, Christianity and the Codification of Custom

3.1 Colonial representations and the myth of egalitarianism

British colonial expansion into the Naga Hills in the nineteenth century produced extensive ethnographic records. Administrators and missionaries described the Nagas as “democratic” and often contrasted Naga women's apparent freedom with the seclusion of women in caste-Hindu plains society [4]. These accounts helped cement the idea of Naga society as naturally egalitarian and “gender-just,” an image that has persisted in nationalist and local discourse as well as in some early feminist writings [5].

However, these early writings largely ignored women's perspectives and took male elders' accounts of customs as authoritative. Contemporary scholars argue that such representations obscure the everyday exclusions and structural constraints faced by Naga women in the domains of inheritance, governance, and law [6,7,1].

3.2 Christianisation and gender

Christian missions, which expanded rapidly from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, profoundly reshaped religious practices, moral codes, and educational opportunities. Mission schools and later government institutions opened literacy and limited formal education to both boys and girls, enabling some women to become teachers, nurses, and church workers [5]. Church-based women's fellowships and organizations provided new arenas for leadership, networking, and moral authority, particularly in campaigns against alcohol abuse, domestic violence, and inter-village feuds [10,11].

Simultaneously, missionary norms often reinforced domestic ideals of womanhood, emphasizing the roles of wives and mothers in Christian households and churches. Church leadership structures, like customary political institutions, remained male-dominated; ordained pastors and elders were typically men, while women were channelled into auxiliary or supportive roles [5]. Ghosh shows how church-linked women's activism in Nagaland frequently mobilizes a “maternal frame” that both challenges and reproduces gendered expectations [10].

3.3 Customary law, Article 371A and androcentric jurisprudence

Postcolonial constitutional arrangements have given special recognition to Naga customary law through Article 371A of the Indian Constitution, which provides that no Act of Parliament relating to religious or social practices, Naga customary law and procedure, or ownership and transfer of land and its resources shall apply to Nagaland unless the state assembly decides otherwise. This has been widely celebrated as a safeguard for Indigenous autonomy and tradition [13,14].

However, feminist scholars have pointed out that, in practice, the codification and legal protection of customary law have entrenched gender-biased norms under the banner of cultural rights [6,1,7,14]. Customary law, interpreted and administered almost exclusively by male elders, continues to discriminate against women in matters of inheritance, guardianship, divorce, participation in village councils, and adjudicatory bodies [13,9,7]. Women may be consulted informally, but they lack standing as decision-makers in most tribunals.

A crucial analytical contribution is the distinction between *customary laws* and *customary practices*. Customary law refers to relatively formalized rules recognized by village councils and the state, often in written compendia, whereas customary practice encompasses everyday social norms, rituals, gender roles, and social expectations. Both spheres reinforce patriarchal power: law through explicit exclusion and property regimes, and practice through the normalization of women's subordination in marriage, sexuality, mobility, and public speech [6,1]. This resonates with wider African and global debates on living customary law and women's land rights, where women have challenged male elders' monopolization of "culture" to justify unequal norms [2,3].

4. Contemporary Transformations: Education, Economy and Migration

4.1 Education and new aspirations

The post-independence expansion of schooling and colleges across Nagaland has significantly increased girls' access to formal education, particularly in urban centers and larger towns. Educated Naga women increasingly enter professions such as teaching, nursing, bureaucracy, banking, and civil society work [1,5]. Higher education has been a critical avenue for questioning patriarchal customs and articulating claims to equality and citizenship, especially among younger cohorts [13,15].

However, educational gains are not evenly distributed. Rural, poorer, and more remote communities continue to face infrastructural and cultural barriers to girls' education, and higher education does not automatically translate into corresponding authority within the customary or household spheres [1].

4.2 Self-help groups and economic empowerment

The proliferation of women's self-help groups (SHGs) in Nagaland has transformed rural gender relations. SHGs, often promoted by churches, non-governmental organizations, and government schemes, provide women with opportunities for savings, microcredit, collective enterprises, and skills training [16]. A case study of Chakhesang women's SHGs in Phek district, for example, shows that participation enhances women's financial autonomy, decision-making within the household, and confidence in interacting with formal institutions [16].

Ghushepu and Walling highlight the role of *men as allies* in these processes. Engaging men in SHG initiatives and broader gender equality programs can help renegotiate gendered divisions of labour and overcome resistance rooted in patriarchal norms. Where husbands and male relatives support women's participation, SHGs are more likely to translate into meaningful changes in intra-household bargaining power and community leadership roles [16].

Nevertheless, SHG-based empowerment has limitations. Scholars have pointed out that such programmes can increase women's overall workload—adding income generation and group responsibilities to existing domestic and agricultural labor—without redistributing care work or fundamentally altering male dominance over land and customary institutions [1,16]. Moreover, access to SHGs may be skewed towards relatively better-off or already networked women, leaving the most marginalized with fewer benefits.

4.3 Urbanisation, migration and global cultural flows

Urban growth in Dimapur, Kohima, and district headquarters, along with migration for education and employment in metropolitan cities, has exposed Naga youth to new social milieus and cultural models. Urban Naga women increasingly participate in the service sector, student politics, the media, and creative industries. Fashion, popular music, beauty pageants, and social media are important arenas through which young women negotiate their identities and visibility [17].

Korean popular culture, global Christian networks, and pan-indigenous solidarities have also influenced

gender imaginaries, sometimes enabling alternative expressions of femininity and masculinity that depart from village norms [10,11]. Yet, these cultural flows can impose new pressures—such as idealized beauty standards and consumerist expectations—on women’s bodies and labour, creating fresh forms of objectification, even as old restrictions on mobility and sexuality persist [17].

5. Customary Law, Political Representation and Feminist Counterpublics

5.1 Gendered practices of customary law

Recent empirical and theoretical work has interrogated the gendered nature of Naga customary law. Yanthan shows that across diverse tribes, customary law is a “male-centred arena” in which rules governing inheritance, authority, and dispute resolution overwhelmingly privilege men and constrain women’s rights [9]. In a complementary analysis, Yanthan traces how patriarchy is normalized in customary tribunals and village arbitration, where women often appear only as complainants or witnesses, not as adjudicators [7].

Longkoi, focusing on the Khiamniungan community, asks whether Naga society can be truly called egalitarian and democratic when women are systematically excluded from morung institutions, land inheritance, village administration, and recorded oral histories [8]. These analyses foreground women’s internalization of patriarchal norms: many women express the view that daughters should not inherit land because they “leave” their natal home at marriage, or that women’s entry into morung or councils would violate custom [1,8]. This reveals not simply top-down imposition but deep socialization into gendered hierarchies, making the reform complex and potentially divisive.

Chüzho builds on the work of Naga writer-activist Monalisa Changkija to theorize “customary victimization”—the ways in which both customary law, in its legal-juridical aspect, and customary practice, in its everyday ritual and symbolic forms, produce gendered harm while being defended as cultural essence [6]. Changkija’s essays document how appeals to “tradition” often foreclose women’s claims to justice, especially in cases of domestic violence, property disputes, and political participation [12]. This perspective challenges the tendency to treat “culture” as homogeneous and static and opens space for internal critique grounded in Naga women’s lived experiences [1].

5.2 Political reservations, Article 371A and contested citizenship

Debates over women’s reservations in urban local bodies (ULBs) have made the tension between customary autonomy and gender equality especially visible. The Nagaland Municipal Act (2001, amended 2006) provides for a 33% reservation of seats for women in ULBs, in line with the national policy. However, many tribal bodies and customary institutions opposed its implementation, arguing that reservations violated Article 371A and threatened Naga customary practices [13,14].

Women’s organizations were divided: some strongly supported reservations as a minimum step towards correcting historic exclusion from formal politics, while others, often aligned with male-dominated tribal councils, rejected them, citing fears of external interference, social disintegration, or the erosion of male authority [13,18,14]. Protests, litigations, and negotiations ensued, and for years, no ULB elections were held, illustrating the political volatility of gender reform within a framework of protected customary law [17,15].

Until 2023, Nagaland’s Legislative Assembly had never had a woman MLA. The election of the first women legislators was widely hailed as historic; however, scholars emphasize that symbolic breakthroughs must be accompanied by structural changes in party politics, customary law, and social attitudes if they are to translate into substantive gender equality [13,15,18].

These struggles echo broader global debates on legal pluralism and women's citizenship in customary law regimes, where collective cultural rights and individual gender equality claims are often framed in zero-sum terms [2,3]. The Naga case shows that women's equality can be framed as both a constitutional right and an internal demand for the reinterpretation of custom.

5.3 Naga women's organisations and the “maternal counterpublic”

Despite their formal exclusion from many political institutions, Naga women have long engaged in peace initiatives, social reform, and rights advocacy. Organizations such as the Naga Mothers' Association, tribal women's unions, and church women's fellowships have played central roles in mediating conflicts, campaigning against alcoholism and drug abuse, and demanding an end to human rights violations in the context of militarization [10,11,5].

Ghosh and Manchanda and Kakran describe how these organizations often mobilize a “maternal frame”—claiming authority as mothers and guardians of the community—to intervene in political processes that otherwise bar women's participation [10,11]. This has been theorized as a *maternal counterpublic*: a space where women articulate critiques of both state violence and patriarchal authority, while grounding their legitimacy in recognizable cultural roles rather than explicitly feminist or rights-based language.

This strategy has pragmatic advantages in conservative contexts but also risks reinforcing essentialist notions of womanhood, confined to motherhood and care [10]. Even within women's organizations, class, tribal, denominational, and generational differences shape agendas and tactics, underscoring that Naga women are not a homogeneous constituency [1,5].

6. Case Illustration: Ao Women and the Politics of Change

The Ao Naga provide a useful illustration of how these broader dynamics play out in specific communities. Historical and contemporary writings by and about Ao intellectuals, including Temsula Ao and Monalisa Changkija, document a systematic list of “social disqualifications” imposed on Ao women: exclusion from the Putu Menden, prohibition from certain rituals, restrictions on speech in council spaces, and the denial of inheritance rights [12,4,5]. These norms are embedded in proverbs, myths, and everyday practices that normalize male authority as the foundation of social order.

Simultaneously, Ao women's organizations, such as the Watsu Mungdang, have emerged as powerful actors in promoting education, health, anti-alcohol campaigns, and, more recently, debates on political representation [1,5]. Educated Ao women working in government, academia, and civil society have been at the forefront of articulating critiques of customary discrimination and advocating for reforms in inheritance and participation rights.

The controversy over women's reservation in ULBs revealed deep fractures within Ao society. While many younger and urban women supported reservation, some older or rural women opposed it, aligning with male leaders who framed reservations as threats to tradition and communal solidarity [13,17]. This intra-gender divergence highlights the importance of attending to intersecting identities—age, class, rural–urban location, and denominational affiliation—in understanding Naga women's perspectives on change.

7. Discussion

The literature reviewed here reveals the complex and dynamic landscape of gender relations in Naga society. Several analytical points have emerged.

First, the oft-repeated claim that Naga society is inherently egalitarian and democratic is empirically untenable when examined through a gender lens. Customary law, village councils, morung institutions, and property regimes systematically privilege men and exclude women from formal authority, even as

women's labour is indispensable to agrarian production and household survival [6–9,4].

Second, the legal and political recognition of customary law under Article 371A is a double-edged sword. While crucial for protecting Indigenous autonomy in a post-colonial nation-state, it has also been used to shield gender-discriminatory norms from scrutiny and reform [13,14]. The challenge is to differentiate between cultural practices that communities wish to preserve and those aspects of customary law that perpetuate injustice, including against women and other marginalized groups [1–3].

Third, Christianisation, education, SHGs, and urbanization have undeniably expanded women's opportunities and generated new subjectivities. However, these processes do not automatically dissolve patriarchy; rather, they coexist with and sometimes reinforce traditional gender roles. Educated, economically active women often face a “double burden” of paid and unpaid work and continue to confront male-dominated structures in customary forums and party politics [1,16,15].

Fourth, Naga feminist and gender-sensitive scholarship is developing a sophisticated vocabulary to critique and reimagine customs from within. Concepts such as “customary victimization,” distinctions between law and practice, and analyses of the maternal counterpublic provide tools for engaging with tradition without romanticizing or rejecting it wholesale [6,10,11].

Finally, the Naga case speaks to broader debates on Indigenous rights, legal pluralism, and gender justice. It illustrates the tensions between collective cultural rights and individual gender equality claims, as well as between internal self-determination and the risk that “culture” becomes a language for legitimizing hierarchical power relations. Therefore, any attempt to transform women's status must proceed via dialogic, community-grounded processes that include women and supportive men as central protagonists, rather than imposing external models of reform [2,3].

8. Conclusion

Women's roles in Naga society have changed substantially over the past century, but in an uneven and sometimes contradictory manner. In the “traditional” period, women were visible and valued as workers, mothers, and culture bearers; however, they occupied subordinate positions in political, juridical, and property regimes [4,5]. Colonial rule and Christian missions reshaped these institutions, providing new educational and organizational platforms while reinforcing domestic ideals and codifying androcentric customary law [10,11].

In contemporary Nagaland and Naga-inhabited areas, rising female literacy, SHG participation, paid employment, civil society activism, and digital connectivity have expanded women's capacity to question injustice and claim public space [1,16,15]. Simultaneously, the continuing power of male-dominated customary institutions, the legal shelter provided by Article 371A, and the resilience of patriarchal norms in both rural and urban settings constrain the transformative potential of these changes [6,13,14].

Future research would benefit from more fine-grained comparative ethnographies across different Naga tribes and locations, greater attention to sexuality and queer identities, and longitudinal studies of how specific reforms—such as changes in inheritance practices or the successful implementation of political reservations—affect gender power relations over time. Policy initiatives and activism that combine critical engagement with customary law, constitutional guarantees of equality, SHG-based economic interventions, and programmes that involve men as allies in rethinking masculinities and care work appear particularly promising [16,2,3].

Ultimately, the changing role of women in Naga society is best understood not as a straightforward transition from “tradition” to “modernity,” but as a contested, ongoing negotiation in which women and

men, elders and youth, churches, customary councils, and the state participate. Recognizing women as rights-bearing citizens and central actors in this negotiation is essential for building a more just and inclusive future.

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