



***Em*a market and the meaning of Empowerment- a case of women's market in Manipur**

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ABSTRACT

The present research was conducted to inquiry into the meaning of empowerment that has different meanings in different socio-cultural, economic and political contexts of the various dimension of empowerment on economic, social, physical and political. The research put forth the concept of economic empowerment of women in the marketplace of Ema Keithel of Manipur. The economic independence, strong cord of mutual understanding and collective identity among the women aside construction of feminism among the Meitei women in the traditional valley society. In the context of Ema Keithel of Manipur why the concept of economic empowerment plays a critical role in understanding the real meaning to the development of the women in their culture through embedded social, political domain of the society.

Introduction

Empowerment as a concept has been interpreted and analysed by social scientist in various forms from their respective disciplines. But to conceptualize and contextualize “empowerment” as a matter of subject discussion has been started since United Nation works on development projects across the world. One of the most recent studies conducted by UN on the World Survey on Role of Women in Development especially focused on the impact on the role of women in the economy at the national, regional and international levels (UN, World Survey on the Role of Women in Development, 2019).

The World Survey focused on the reasons for the high levels of income poverty and time poverty among women and contains an analysis of the rationale for taking an integrated policy approach to addressing the double blind experienced by development, for low-income in particular. Many international organizations focused on improving status of women and empowering them for development process in low and middle-income countries. According to the World Bank (2004), “Empowerment” it is the process of increasing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes. The United Nations declared the year 2001 as the International Year for Women's Empowerment'. And, the same year even in India 2001 was declared as the 'Women's Empowerment Year' (Mandal, 2013) .Women empowerment as a concept was introduced at the International women Conference in 1985 at Nairobi, which defined it as redistribution of social power and control of resources in favour of women (Panucha & Ankita Khatik, 2005).

The UN on “Empowerment” as Being empowered, indeed, is beneficial not only for the women themselves but for their whole family (UN, 2012). In one of the meeting the most appropriate definition of empowerment as “ iterative process with keys components including an enabling environment that encourages popular participation in decision making that affects the achievement of goals lie poverty eradication, social integration and decent work for all as well as sustainable development ” (UN, social.un.org, 2012).

Some of the characteristics described for Empowerment in previous findings are people -both women and men- having the characteristics of freedom, values, autonomy, equal mindedness, self-determination, attitude, self-reliance, having own agenda, gaining skills, solving problems, strength to face religious pressures, challenges male dominance etc. But UNECO, on gender mainstreaming framework opinion that “No one can empower another: only the individual can empower herself or himself to make choices or to speak out”. However, institutions including international cooperation agencies can support processes that can nurture self-empowerment of individuals or groups (UNESCO’s Gender Mainstreaming Implementation Framework, 2003).

In view to these, the present research was conducted to inquiry into the meaning of empowerment that has different meanings in different socio-cultural, economic and political contexts. An exploration of local terms associated with empowerment around the world always encompasses a wide variety of definitions (Mandal, 2013). Of the various dimension of empowerment on economic, social, physical and political. The research put forth the concept of economic empowerment of women in the marketplace of *Ema Keithel* of Manipur. In the context of *Ema Keithel* of Manipur why the concept of economic empowerment plays a critical role in understanding the real meaning to the development of the women in their culture through embedded social, political domain of the society.

Methodology

The present research attempts to study the market as a place which helps in enhancing unity among diversity and analyze the diverse nature of the market through various networks and linkages in the whole society. Through this study, it will give a picture of how the market serves as a centre to other markets in the state by means of flow of goods from farmers to the consumers for daily consumption and how it affect the whole system when one part of it affect the other part of the market. It also attempts to understand how women play a vital role in the market affairs and the state as a whole. The research tries to explore the function of market in empowering women and to understand socio-cultural implication of the market place with relation to womenfolk.

The research methodology used is that of an ethnography employing an interpretive paradigm along with multi data collection process. Being a feminist anthropologist collecting data on women market was one of the added advantages above being native during the study. The study was conducted for six months among the women in the *Ema* market. During the fieldwork observations and audio recorder for interviews were employed without disturbing the natural settings of the market. At various spots, researchers self-engaged in participant observation by shopping at and through sitting with these women while interacting with the customers. These direct participant observation from several spots proved to be very effective for data collection. During the study the researcher have established a good rapport with some of the key informant comprises of the office bearers of the women’s market association.

The markets open around 7 am in the morning till late evening in all the three marketplaces. But those of the street vendors they have a different time slot starting from as early as 3 am in the morning and ends around 8 am. The early morning market comprises of fresh vegetables, fruits and poultry items which are sold by either farmers directly or one of the collector from farmers, of remote villages. As the farmers are selling their products directly one finds it at a much cheaper price as compare to when one buy at the latter hour of the day through a middleman.

There are quite a few association of women's union present in the *Ema* Market. Each one of them having a different motto and objectives by themselves but one common to all of them is for the welfare of the women sellers.

Results

Ema Keithel or *Khwairamband Keithel* serve as the power house of women empowerment, a marketplace where women from different part of Manipur come and share their ideas, socio-economic life. It represents as a symbol of women solidarity among various groups in Manipur society. It not only serves as a market place but also a place where the women shared their views when state is under socio-economic turmoil with the negative movement of the political affairs. They play crucial roles exerting their voices against the pessimistic nature of the state affairs and helps in bringing a constructive result for the welfare of the collective involvement of women in bringing peace with socio-economic prosperity in the state. A unique feature of the women in Manipur is that they take the central role in the business of marketing of almost all goods-the products of agriculture, handloom and handicrafts. The women in the '*Ema Market*' which is also known as Sana Keithel of the capital town is constituted both the women of the town, rural and hilly areas. In the rural areas also there are markets after the model of Sana Keithel run by women. The *Ema market* can be divided into three main building comprises of the first established one *Purana bazaar* locally known as *Leimarel Shidabi ema keithel* (*Leimarel Shidabai* is Goddess of Supreme Household). The second is *Laxmi bazaar* locally known as *Emoinu Ema Keithel* (*Goddess of prosperity, wealth, and kitchen*). The last one is the New market locally known as *Phouoibe ema keithel* (*Goddess of bounty*).

In all the three markets, they have women association who act as social support and law maintaining bodies inside the markets. The rules inside this marketplace is being followed and maintained till date. As upon, any violation of the rules strict action are taken by the association against the defaulter.

Women empowerment in Economic Domain

In Manipur, it is common to find that the marketplace occupied by women traders and middle women who do the transaction of commodities and they are the women who fixed the price of the commodities. In fact, it is the women who control over the market transaction in the society. But when we inquire all most every women are selling the commodities on a mere margin of profit.

One of the women traders narrate "I am selling the local daily wear *phanek* cloth for lower portion of the female body; my profit is Rs 20 per *phanek* it depends on occasion and festival the profit also varies per day. But the minimum profit I can earn on a day range from Rs 100 to Rs 500 on a day from which I can feed my family of five members with food and expenditures for children education."

When inquired further why the profit margin is very low she replied “the *phanek* that I am selling is a normal daily one which starts from Rs 200 and range upto Rs 1200 for silk woven *phanek*. I am buying these *phanek* from the middle women who collect these *phanek* from the villages in bulk, so I have to give her share of profit too resulting in mere profit for selling a *phanek*”. One of the unique features of women market is that these women abide by the age old tradition of the marketplace that “one trader one commodities rule” which have been strictly followed from ages in *Emā Keithel*. With coming up of western cloth and import of cheap clothing materials from outside the state there is a huge impact on the trade of these women as the demand from the population is decreasing at the fast rate. Not only declining in consumer preference but also the increasing price of raw materials by the nonlocal wholesale retailers in the state make a way for these women traders in hardship of earning money and profits.

So, it came to light that the raw materials are supplied from the nonlocal retailers in the Imphal city. The primary handloom weavers bought raw materials from the nonlocal retailers and their finished products are collected by the middle women from the weavers and the products is bought to the women traders of *Emā Keithel*.

The amount of income generated by the primary weavers is also a small amount paid for their handloom labour. Handloom weavers are found in many houses of villages of Manipur and at the periphery of Imphal city. In fact, it can be summarised that women in Manipur society are economically self-dependent in view that these women earn for their living and contribute for the household.

The findings suggest that being economically self-dependent women and economic independent women to refer as economic empowerment are two different meaning in the case of *Emā Keithel* where previous scholars used to define ‘self-dependent’ women as ‘economic empowerment’. Economic empowerment can be achieved only when these indigenous women gets their raw materials at the government standardised rate being supplied to the nonlocal retailers.

In one of the case from primary weavers who was visiting the *Emā Keithel* market for direct selling to the traders had opined that “I came from nearby village of Imphal city, generally the *lalonbi* came and collect my finished products and she give me money based on the quality of the products and is not profitable at all, so I came here directly to the women traders after I received the money I will buy the raw material from the shop retailers of nonlocal. The problem we face every time as weavers is the rate kept on increasing for the raw material and the retailers conveniently clarifies by giving so many issues based on transportation, social problems and shortage of raw material import etc”. So, how can we make a living and run our houses as the middle women will try to bargain for the lowest possible price. The government should take intervention from time to time for the primary producers if economic empowerment of women meant to be meaningful in the society.

The women of Manipur are economically self-dependent since time immemorial and so many research has been conducted on the role of women and particularly focusing on the *Emā Keithel*. One needs to analyse the real nature of the women in economy through the emic view how the flows of income and transaction goes where for the development of the society. This can be one of the reasons why even after ages of struggle and hardship by women in Manipur society are not enable enough to improve the development of the society.

In actual meaning the real economic empowerment will be happen when this primary producers

get their raw material at the fixed and fair rate approved by the government and it should be followed everywhere.

Women empowerment in Social Domain

In Manipur, women place a very high social position unlike one finds in other parts of India. This is very much rooted in the family and household activities. It is usual that one will observe in society of Manipur during festivals of holi (*yaosang*) where large numbers of young unmarried and adolescent young girls along with boys and men are seen holding hands together and dance in circular motion at night in every corner of valley in Manipur. The particular form of dance in circular motion with sounds of drums and music also known as *Thabal chongba* is a social approved power given to the young girls of marriageable age. These kinds of tradition are part of social structure to give power to young girls and women of the society where they can choose their own life partner. It is socially being observed on every season during holi festival, *Meitei Cheirouba* (New Year) celebration in Manipur. One of the peculiar features of this social festival is that the young girls and unmarried women join and gather together for the collection of money from every house in the locality and nearby shops. The collected amounts of funds are managed together for the expenses of the *Thabal chongba*. This means the sole organisers of the *Thabal chongba* are managed and operated by young girls and unmarried women from the locality. Even the adults' women member of the locality actively supports these events through strict vigilance over the large crowd if any unwanted incidences might happen they will control it. Not only in traditional festivals even among modern family the women are not lagged behind in sports, education, jobs or labour work. In Manipur, women are held with exceptional in all the fields that they have gone through. Even in sports, women from Manipur are the foremost contributors in the achievement of success around the world.

The women's movement has been actively involved more than century in social affairs of the society through *Meira Paibi* and *Nisha Bandh* in every locality also known as *Leikai* in Manipur. The *Meira paibi* are middle aged women association of locality who assemble together on daily or weekend basis. The purpose of these associations comprises of maintaining moral behaviour of the men and youth in the locality, ban of liquor and drugs consumption and production in the society and also acts as social support group for women in the locality through *Marup*. *Marup* in Manipur means friends but is literally a group of members who collectively contribute money on monthly or weekly basis and support one member of the groups through that money. This system of *Marup* has been part of the society and help member as a chit bank improving social and economic life of the people especially among women. As many young women formed *Marup* not just for money but also for household items like utensils, clothing materials, jewellery, daily needs etc. So, these women can contribute their small amount of money in an instalment and their needs and requirements are easily met. In a way the women make ways through collective social action to empower themselves.

Women empowerment in political Domain

In an interview with one of the women leader of the *Ema Keithel* women's association narrate the various incidence of the women's movement in the society of Manipur.

One will never find the strong solidarity of Manipuri women in the rest of the country other than the society of Manipur. The history of Manipur has witness numbers of women's war and social movement. Still every member in the society do remember till days and observed the women's war

on 1906's and 1939's against the Colonial order which was not in favour of the people in the society. Even the ruler has to change the order if the woman in the society stands solidarity and unite for the common goods. Such were few examples of the role of women in Manipur society. Even in modern society, the women of Manipur still hold firm and stand together against any unlawful activities from its own people or outsiders. Women are fearless in the society of Manipur when they unit against any misbehaviour from men by local, outsider or even the military. Of one such incidence was the protest of Assam Rifles to go back from the *Kangla* fort, a place for religious and earlier used to be King's residence. This incidence was happen in 2004 when the Indian paramilitary force Assam rifle army took a woman for investigation and later bullet-ridden, brutally raped and badly mutilated dead body was found. Some women leaders from different parts of Manipur come forward and march naked towards the Headquarter of Assam Rifles in front of the *Kangla* fort shouting slogan "Indian Army, rape us too... We are all Manorama's mothers». From this unfortunate and eventful day the women of Manipur has marked a Legend in the history of not only Manipur but also in the whole World. From this day onwards, the state government immediately enforced that Assam Rifle to be shifted away from *Kangla* fort. In other words, it can be said that these women in Manipur acts fearless and stand-up for their rights and fight back to protect their dignity. In Manipur women's unite themselves as solidarity between various ethnic groups and stand for their rightful status in the market and the society at large. These can be one of the factors that the *Emā Keithel* stood to be one of its kinds in the whole world. The unique features of the market are that being not only the women traders selling commodities but even the middle transaction all being done by women. Starting from the primary producers as women weavers from the household unit of the villages of Manipur are all embedded network of women's solidarity from the family to the political decision makers of the society. These are not only for handloom weavers but also for other producers like bamboo and cane industry, puppet and clay making artisans. The bases of the unit of production are mostly women from the society.

Discussion

According to Unifem, the process of empowerment has five dimensions, viz. cognitive, psychological, physical, economic and political. There are different methods of empowerment which can be achieved by means of acquiring assets and properties – economic, social, physical, and intellectual; by attaining education – conventional, vocational, scientific etc. Economic empowerment as described by (Mandal, 2013) as a means by which the poor, landless, deprived and oppressed people of all societies can be freed from all kinds of deprivation and oppression and basic necessities of the person can be achieved. In the case of *Emā Keithel* of Manipur these women are traders who have a social role as housewife, mother, daughter, sister and mother-in-law. At the same time, these same women also fight back as political leaders in groups against any policy and antisocial activities that will affect the welfare of the society and the women in the society. These women have an active role in political decision making process of the society and for the welfare of the state as a whole. The women in this part of the India hold a very high position in religious, political and social dimensions. Market women's consciousness of the traditional political culture without any institutionalized base and mobilization is age old phenomenon due to historic forces which the British paramount realized well before (Sudhir, 2003; Chingtham, 2014). As social actors, women (and men) continually strategize to defend and improve their own positions in relation to gender and other power hierarchies, by choosing from among the options currently available to them (Clark, 2003). The *Emā* market is not just a marketplace for these women traders in Manipur but as a centre of solidarity and cooperation among these women. The women's contribution in the economic sphere is great and unlike any other parts of India. And the concepts of solidarity amongst women's groups are fairly strong (Tanuja, 2011)

Women are mostly perceived as individuals are not independently capable of earning an income (Mlambo-Ngc (Mokta, 2014); they are relegated mainly to household duties and poorly paid labor (Terry & Gomez, 2011). In the case of Manipur society women take the lead role in the matters of household decision along with their husband, they share an equal role in the family (Ch., 2012). In context of *Emā* market and other markets in Manipur Women are the sole traders in the state. The *Khwairamband bazar* besides being an epicentre of all women's marketing network it also serves as the main socio-political where state's affairs emerged and prepared a promising place of interactions on various socio-political issues through constant mutual exchanges within and in between different customers and visitors to the market. (Sudhir, 2003). According to Sudhir H. (2003), there was a rule for that a male member of the house to serve for the Princely state for one month in a year as a tax payer. When the man of houses went for the services to serve the Kingdom, all burden of child rearing and earning were left at the hand of female. So, with no choice women left to feed their children and look after the elderly in the house women came out to sell their surplus vegetables and others daily items at the nearby adjoining field or place and river bank. Thus, the prevailing conditions of the society make ways for the women of Manipur to cross the barrier of male dependency towards making of the present *Emā Keithel* of Manipur. *Emā* market is considered as the principle's square of women's politicization and community life where developed commonality, unity, self-confidence and collectively among themselves (Sudhir, 2003).

All the women traders were like an 'extended family' living together each other making their business to sustenance of the families. The economic independence, strong cord of mutual understanding and collective identity among the women aside construction of feminism among the *Meitei* women in the traditional valley society. Before fly shuttle for handloom was introduced in Manipur, *Meitei* women weavers used loin looms and purchased cotton yarn made by tribal women and silk yarn and loom accessories made by lower castes, who then bought finished products from the *Meitei* weavers. Thus, the process of weaving helped in the integration of the various ethnic groups of Manipur, ensuring interdependence and economic exchange (Ch., 2012). There was interdependence of trade among various ethnic groups in Manipur before economic reforms of 1990's and women were self-reliance in the society. Markets women collectively are involved the state affair indirectly in collective capacity in multi forms towards shaping of the state policies and correction of the administrative fallout of the state (Sudhir, 2003). It is these women who are coming from different villages of Manipur represent the mobility of women in the region (Chingtham, 2014).

The share of female worker to the total worker of national worker comparison is around 39% in Manipur but in National figure is sometimes less and around 25% over the decades. The percentage of female cultivator (37.9), household industry worker (14.1) and other worker (34.5) in the state are high compare to the national figure. Even the female literacy rate in the state is increasing with 39.6% (Census, 1991) to 73.2% (Census, 2011) (Thingbaijam & Das, 2015) . Manipuri women's role in the socio-economic and cultural life is significant.

Women's economic empowerment is central to realizing women's rights and gender equality. Women's economic empowerment includes women's ability to participate equally in existing markets; their access to and control over productive resources, access to decent work, control over their own time, lives and bodies; and increased voice, agency and meaningful participation in economic decision-making at all levels from the household to international institutions. (Nation, 2018). There is increasing rise in the number of women entrepreneurs and women self-help groups (Thingbaijam & Das, 2015). In Manipur, women are not just empowering themselves but are aware of their rights and taking very possibilities of the various governmental schemes for the welfare of women. For these

hardworking women of the society a small act of support from the government and public would easily make them stand for themselves to contribute in the economic development of the society.

Conclusion

It becomes cleared that “Empowerment” as a term itself conveys different meaning depending on the context and content that we can conclude from the analysis of the *Ema Keithel* of Manipur. Being economic empowerment does not literally mean that the person of the community as a whole is economically self reliance. This can be drawn from the case of economic domain of women traders in *Ema Keithel* that the primary producer of the products for handloom basically depends on the non Manipuri who are outsiders for raw materials. In short, it can be conclude that true economic empowerment for the women traders of Manipur will be achieved only when they can control or bargain for the raw material in the price which they can be afforded by the women in the society.

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