

WOMEN'S ROLE AS CAREGIVERS AND PATRIARCHY

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Abstract

In a small town of Manipur, India, a woman who contracted Covid 19 was expected to continue her duty as a daughter in law. The mother in law, who otherwise had no problem, started questioning her daughter in law's position as a woman when she had to take a break from her daily household chores with her getting infected. To an old woman born and brought up in a patriarchal society, the values of patriarchy with women's most important duty being that of a homemaker, caregiver and nurturer weigh more than anything. Glorification of women on social media posts became quite popular with women being appreciated and glorified for being able to cook or take care of the family despite being Covid positive herself and needing care and medical help. This raises questions as to when is a woman considered deserving of care and help from others? And most importantly, why do we normalise women to work and take care of others when she herself needs it? It is not uncommon to find women getting ready for children, doing household chores even when they are unwell. She is considered rebellious or unfit to be a mother if she puts herself first at any point. While women are considered and expected to be born caregivers who put family before themselves with natural instinct to sacrifice their own health, careers etc. for the families, their sacrifices are not made visible. It is always taken for granted and considered to be of least significance. This paper addresses the role of women as a caregiver at home or as a profession from the lens of feminism. With patriarchy being at the root cause for the plight of women, the paper will try to understand how gender roles are predetermined and how this whole belief system around "care" as a woman's duty is a result of it. It is only when patriarchy is addressed that we will be able to find a way to sustainable care in the future with everyone across all genders being able to avail it and their works being respected.

Keywords - unpaid works, feminism, Meitei women, measuring unpaid careworks, patriarchy etc.

Introduction

The paper is an attempt to uncover the truth behind the accepted narratives of the Meitei community of Manipur. The community is often defined and romanticized by many writers as that of an egalitarian

society with “Ema Keithel”¹ (the literal meaning of which is Mother’s Market), which is the only market run by women in India, being the epitome of women empowerment. Therefore, by looking at the role of women as caregivers and nurturers from feminist lens, the paper challenges the given narratives of this community. The reality about the place of women is hardly being captured when we are keen on focusing the participation of women in public spheres and go by the definition that women’s presence in the public spheres equals better position and respect to women.

A very concerned middle aged man once pointed out to me about how he was deeply saddened by the sight of a Meitei woman who had taken up the work of a butcher to make ends meet. To him, the status of women in recent times has fallen to the level where he is now witnessing women being engaged in such jobs. While one can explain to him to have equal respect for all the jobs be it menial or reputed ones and also not to be surprised and sink it in that women too can be butchers and should not be discriminated against based on their genders, we could be missing out on an important issue here. As we all know that since history feminists all over the world have been fighting for women to free her from the clutches of patriarchy in order that women are able to enjoy equal rights with men. This fight which started as a demand for suffrage have progressed to the point where feminists challenge the heteronormativity by propagating the normality of variations in gender identity besides the binary classifications of male and female. Acquiring skills, gaining knowledge, understanding the know-hows, being educated are something which every person should be able to get access to. However, breaking the stereotypes and practices not by choice but out of inescapable

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- 1) Ema Keithel unquestionably is the definition of women empowerment. Ema Keithel, the literal translation of which means the “Mother’s Market is a one of its kind concept in Asia which is wholly operated by women. It is one of the oldest markets built around 1533AD which has still retained its tradition (Sanghamitra 18 June, 2018).
 - 2) Mazumdar Sanghamitra, “Ema Keithel | When a 16th century concept shapes a fashion film” *The Statesman*, June 18, 2018.
<https://www.thestatesman.com/features/ema-keithel-when-a-16th-century-concept-shapes-a-fashion-film-1502649611.html> (accessed, December 2, 2022)
 - 3) External Affairs minister S Jaishankar of India called Ima Market an example of nari shakti (women’s power) in a tweet about his visit to Manipur’s Ima market (*The Indian Express* 28 November 2022)
 - 4) the word ‘Ema’ in Ema Keithel is also written as ‘Ima’.

circumstances and unavoidable constraints because one has no choice, does not necessarily seem to lead to emancipation of women². This is the case of many Meitei women, of which will be explained later in the paper. If we are to understand the position of women in Meitei society, in fact, for any society, we definitely need to pay attention to the unpaid household works, such as taking care of the family members by looking after the children, washing clothes, cooking for the family etc. which basically have been assigned to women since time immemorial in almost every society. Which is exactly the reason why feminists around the globe have been debating domestic labour since decades when it comes to women issues.

Measuring unpaid labour

The domestic labour debates of 1960s and 1970s mark the start of discussion of the place of unpaid works with many feminists critiquing Marx's analysis of capital accumulation which does not take into account domestic labours done mostly by women and thus it sets the discourse about care visibility (Tasnim 2020, 30; Meagher 2002).

According to Fraser, social reproduction has a direct implication on economic reproductions which a capitalist society always tends to ignore. Economic production cannot simply exist without the support of social production as it is these household chores which include caring such as cleaning, washing, cooking, childcare, taking care of the sick at home that prepares one to join the paid workforce for economic production (2016, 102). Tasnim discussed the works of many scholars that address the issues of unpaid work in order to address the importance of making care visible and the challenges in capturing it (2020).

By taking Fraser's work, Tasnim explains how the load of unpaid work is ultimately on the poorest section of the society. Tasnim explains that Fraser's analysis of the crisis of social reproduction is important for developing countries like India as these blind sightedness and disregard of unpaid labour performed by women could be the main stumbling

² In a study conducted among the Albanian migrant women in Greece, gaining economic independence comes at a cost of taking double burdens along with a range of emotional conflicts (Xhaho, Çaro & Bailey 2021, 1443)

block on development of India (2020, 31). Capitalism that encourages state and corporate to disinvest from social welfare while at the same time employing women in the paid workforce has created a dualized system of social reproduction which is commodified for the ones who can afford and privatized for those who cannot. This dualized system of social reproduction means that to sell their care work to privileged women in private homes or public institutions, women who belong to poorer regions migrate, thereby handing over their care work for families and communities to even poorer caregivers. These kinds of migration do not only occur from developing to developed countries, but in fact it also occurs within developing countries with wealthier women hiring lower caste or class women for household chores and thereby lifting the burden of unpaid works from themselves and getting the time and energy to pursue their career or interests (Tasnim 2020, 31). Thus, the burden of unpaid care work is left to be carried by the most underprivileged section of the society. Tasnim taking the work of Indira Hirway and Rania Antonopoulos, relates how due to lack of access to good technology and poverty, women in developing countries remain overburdened with unpaid works and thus getting no time or enough opportunity and energy to acquire skills and develop their capabilities; therefore, reproducing poverty all over again. And this, according to Tasnim, is the very reason why India will benefit greatly if their unpaid care work is made visible, as the recognition of this unpaid labor by policymakers will eventually make it possible to incorporate unpaid labor into the country's national accounts. Arguments and debates for better ways to measure and capture unpaid works either through NSSO survey, which is considered to be very limited, or through time use surveys (TUS), which is encouraged and supported by many scholars, remained inapplicable in countries like India. No matter how good a measurement is in its design, in the Indian context, patriarchy continues to dominate public policies. And thus rendering it useless, as policymakers hardly take initiatives or show readiness in utilising the results of such findings for better decision-making (2020, 32).

Understanding the status of Meitei women in their society

In Manipur, the women of Meitei community since history have been present in public space and have significant roles particularly, in economic spheres. The high social status of women in the community is what many scholars and people alike valorise and talk about with a sense of pride whenever they come to talk about the positions of women in the world (Meetei 2015, Chingtham 2014, Oinam and Thoidingjam 2020). To them, the historic events of the first Nupi Lal (Women's War) of 1904, the second Nupi Lal of 1939, the Meira Paibi (Torch Bearer) movement and that of Ema Keithel are the clear proofs of how empowered the women are³.

The women of Manipur in general do have a great contribution to the economy of the state, given the significance Ema market has in the state. Women in Manipur are mostly occupied in many informal sectors specifically vending, handloom works, agriculture and other paid care works etc. Given the only women market in the country run and dominated by the women, the market serves as the epitome of women emancipation to many (Huirem 2013). It is not uncommon for many scholars to romanticize the idea of women running a market as the ultimate example of an egalitarian society. And given the other contributions and role of women such as Meira Paibi i.e. women organisations that started as unions to control drugs and alcohol related menaces in the society, serving as vigilantes by keeping a vigil over the

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- ³1) the term NupiLal which literally means Women's War is also spell as NupiLan
 - 2) there were two NupiLan, one took place in the year 1904 as an act of defiance against British's order to rebuild State Bungalow (which was burnt down by the people) by reintroducing lallup system which is a form of forced labour where every male member of the society who is between the age of 17 and 60 should serve the king by working for 10 days free with no returns for the labour in every 40 days of work (Hanjabam 2013). The second NupiLan took place in the year 1939. It started as a protest by the women against the economic exploitation and administrative policies under the Maharaja and the British Government and evolved into a movement for constitutional and administrative reform in Manipur. Hanjabam understands this as part of the self-determination movement of Manipur (Hanjabam 2013).
 - 3) The state is a neighbour to Myanmar, a country also known for its opium production. With no state interventions, there was easy access to all the narcotic substances. As a result of which, the state was flooded with drugs, alcohols and other narcotics substances and thus many youths specially boys and men succumbed to addictions which give rise to many crimes and violence, domestic violence and public disorder. Since the state failed to address this problem, in order to bring some public order, being fed up by the prevailing social upheavals, ordinary women started forming groups and started night vigils and patrols in their own localities to prevent drunk men from creating menace. They became so powerful that they even started seizing and vandalizing locally brewed liquor and liquor shops and punishing the distributors by beating them or engaging in some form of public humiliation. They came to be known as the 'NishaBandhis' meaning people who stop drugs. This set the foundation for the rise of MeiraPaibis in Manipur (Mukherji 2010).

society in times of need and defending human rights from the atrocities of Armed Forces Special Power Act (AFSPA) 1958⁴, sealed the accepted narratives of empowered women in the community. The larger picture that engulfs the private lives of women and plays out in many ways on everyday practices that actually defines the place of women in the society is overshadowed by this valorisation (Huirem 2013). Thus, let alone the fight for making unpaid works of women visible, realising that women are discriminated against and challenging the given narratives and glorification of emancipated women of the community remains a humongous task.

Huirem, in her paper questions this sanctified position accorded to Manipuri women by analysing whether this public activism by women frees them from everyday social challenges of being a woman in a patriarchal society to fulfill their dreams and aspirations. She argues that social realities are very different from such romanticised narratives and they do not in anyways align with the interests of the women. According to her, this public adulation of women which is tinged with private agonies makes it even harder to truly locate the status of Meitei women (2013). In a study done by Wahengbam on the social position of women vendors of Ema Keithel, she concluded that the traditional and cultural roles of genders compel the women to face the double burden of having to cater to the women's role of being caregivers and homemakers and at the same time vending at the market for income (2022). The majority of the women at Ema-Keithel come from economically backward classes with little means to meet daily needs. In a few selected interviews she conducted, one could see that it is mostly out of desperation and lack of financial and family support that many of them had come to the market. And even when they had come to the market, that does not mean freedom or emancipation but they rather had to return home to the constraints of patriarchy and fulfil the role of social obligations that women are expected to perform living in the system (2022).

It is in these scenarios that we study and try to understand, and discuss the invisibility of unpaid works women perform in Manipur. The

⁴ Armed Forces Special Powers Act 1958 is an act to curb insurgencies in places declared as “disturbed areas”. It is a draconian act that provides full impunity to the forces deployed to even shoot at sight on suspicions (Saikia, 2014)

successful participation of Meitei women in economic spheres, with women still having a large control over the market since the olden days to this date, ironically do not directly correlate with their position in domestic spheres as they are still in much inferior position to men. According to Huirem, the practice of polygamy still continues in rural areas specifically for the want of a son when the first wife is unable to bear male child. Huirem considers this to be partly influenced by the Hindu practices of male preferences upon the female as its discriminatory practices were successfully able to make an entrance into the private space of the people (2013). Another reason justifying the practice of polygamy is the low sex ratio of males as a result of the ‘Seven Years of Devastation’⁵ when males were sent off to fight war and their population decreased. This kind of explanation is found to be absurd (2013, 106-107). To Huirem, one of the extremely important reasons why this gender inequality remains invisible is the fact that, while women do not hesitate to hold protests or voice for their land, political upheavals, injustice to the people individually or in general, there has not been any movement or popular outcry for the women themselves. No protests or challenges addressing and voicing for their inferior position and any sort of demands for women’s rights have been raised except for the women, suffering on their own individually. She therefore concludes that women’s participation in economic, civil and political life did not really make a difference in their status as their private domain continues to have a strong hold in their public lives and decision makings. (2013, 111).

It thus, should not be surprising anymore to learn that a Meitei woman from a small town of Manipur was expected to continue her duty as a daughter-in-law though she had been tested positive for Covid-19. The mother-in-law, who otherwise had no problem, started questioning her daughter-in-law’s position as a woman when she had to take a break from her daily household chores when she got infected by the virus. To an old woman, born and brought up in a patriarchal society, the value of patriarchy with women’s most important duty being that of a homemaker,

⁵The Seven Years Devastation (1819-1826) is an episode in the History of Manipur when the Burmese invaded Manipur. It was the last of the series of Burmese invasions in Manipur and it brought massive scale of destruction in terms of loss of lives and properties. (Ningthoujam, 2021)

caregiver and nurturer weigh more than anything else. One will not find references for such incidents as they are hardly reported and silently dismissed as a family matter. But to the woman facing it and other women facing similar incidents, it is a matter of great insecurity and threat. When women are overburdened and have won economic control at the expense of their health, time and wellbeing, the situation must be questioned, as empowerment and equality is about sharing the burden and receiving the due respect and value for one's contributions⁶. When the women themselves have internalised patriarchal practices of devaluing women, it becomes all the more difficult to make care visible.

Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic in the care sectors

The pandemic has made visible the importance and contributions of care work which has been mostly performed by women for generations, be it in paid or unpaid sectors globally with this sector being the most overburdened. Even so, when it comes to government formulating policies to recover the lost incurred during the pandemic, this sector still remains the least valued and of least importance with care sectors being considered as less valuable for economic recovery as it is generally considered to be contributing less in the economy of a country. Thus, we can see and may even expect to see women getting more marginalised in a post pandemic world (Ozkazanc-Pan and Pullen 2021, 2).

The issue of women's unpaid work, which mostly includes care for the family, has been addressed and analysed by many scholars with many policies and plans designed to make it visible and taken into account but yet with little progress. However, the market economy which has always been the priority slowed down due to the pandemic while the unpaid care economy remained operating in full swing. Due to this desperate need for care work, the care sector has ultimately drawn attention and this, at the same time exposed the general devaluation of its importance (OXFAM

⁶ "The double burden of work increased women's vulnerability and pushed them further into precarious work situations". While participation in paid work, a woman still has to adhere to and fulfill her role of being a woman and i.e. performing domestic work which are never paid for and thus taking a toll on her (Xhaho, Çaro & Bailey 2021, 1443)

2020). Policy reformers, feminists and activists alike have been advocating for visibility and recognition of the kind of important role these unpaid works contribute to the society; how the unequal distribution of unpaid works among men and women has been the discriminating factors to women with women not having enough time or energy to acquire new skills or pursue new jobs due to their time being consumed in performing unpaid works at home (OECD 2014).

In Manipur as well, the importance of care and women's role in care sectors surfaced with a louder voice with the pandemic exposing the despicable place of women in the society even when the society depended on them. While the Manipur Chief Minister announced a reward of Rs 35 lakh to the medical team for successfully treating the first Covid-19 patient of Manipur in order to show encouragement (Samom 2020), there were cases of some 300 nurses from Manipur resigning from their professions in Kolkata due to many forms of discrimination they had to face at the wake of the pandemic. Many of the nurses were not provided proper protective gear at work with no PPE and safety kits to protect themselves and their patients from the virus at the institutions they were working. On top of this, many of them were not allowed to enter their rented rooms or houses by the locals, calling them 'Corona' and passing racial slurs and some even spitting on them.⁷ Their institutions would not address the plights of these nurses but instead were compounding their plights with non-payment of their salaries, making it all the more difficult for the nurses (Karmakar 2020).

As rightly stated in a research paper by the Oxfam which I would quote here, "as a global community, we entered this moment on the shaky foundations of gender inequality caused by an uneven distribution of care work, compounded in many contexts by other social identities based on ethnicity, income, race, disability, indigeneity, education, and migration status" (OXFAM 2020, 3). The research was conducted in five countries: the USA, Great Britain, Canada, The Philippines, and Kenya, with some supplementary information on a related programme in Tunisia to explore

⁷ "In India, the pandemic has reinforce racism against Northeast Indians, which the country has been grappling with this social problem in the last one decade or so" (Haokip, 2021)

how Covid-19 and related lockdown measures have affected women's and men's unpaid care workloads and their well-being. The finding shows that Covid-19 and the related containment efforts have certainly increased the unpaid care workloads both for men and women but women bearing more burden than men. With lack of access to better technologies, women from poorer background are having to carry even larger burden of time consuming unpaid works such as fetching water, washing clothes manually and home schooling children with no modern technologies and thus getting a toll on their health and well-being with more women reporting to feel more depressed, overworked and physically ill (2020).

Arora and Majumder addressed the experiences of migrant women in Delhi, the capital of India by taking the personal stories of 5 marginalised women who were among the worst hit during the pandemic (2021). Most of the time these women are involved in construction works or providing care services of cleaning, cooking, washing clothes and taking care of children for privileged women who afford their services at a minimum pay possible. These migrant women were able to earn their little freedom from the chains of patriarchy by selling their services for care duties and household works to a privileged woman who in turn gets relief from her unpaid duties by hiring them. During the pandemic, however, their position got worse as working in the informal sectors would not allow them to have savings as they are paid meagrely. Despite having to face the life and death situation of having to walk miles to reach home during the nation-wide lockdown, they are left with nothing but only to be again confined to the role of women which patriarchy has assigned to women. Thus, with their mobility being constrained, the little economic freedom and visibility they had gained is again taken away. Their positions cannot be compared with women in formal sectors as they are majorly still in a better place when compared to migrant women. While the migrant women were kicked off from their works, many women in formal sectors had the option to continue working online. Even when they were asked to leave their jobs or received pay cuts they still could manage from their savings for a few months. This according to them shows how, though women in general compared to men are more adversely affected by the

pandemic, not all women are equally vulnerable and are affected adversely with varying degrees based on their class, caste, and social positioning. Therefore, the assumption that the pandemic is an equalizer for all is far from reality and if we at all learn anything from this pandemic, then it should be that addressing care works and making it visible with care work friendly policies is the way to uplift a nation (2021).

According to Ozkazanc-Pan and Pullan, the pandemic serves two purposes. With it exposing the limitations of our traditional theories of the economy and society, it has also brought to light the important contributions of unpaid works provided mostly by women in economic sectors and societies globally (2021). However, the omission of women's unpaid reproductive works and their roles in the post Covid-19 economic recovery continued. Taking example of Australia's conservative government's 2020 budget which prioritised male-dominated industry investment with no proper planning for women's return to work, they explain how the policy was based on the idea that it was through men's jobs that an economic recovery is possible (2021,2).

In Manipur, given the fact that Ema market alone has a big contribution to the economy with the annual turnover of the market, estimated to be between Rs 40 and 50 crore of the state, not enough was done by the government to lighten the woes of the vendors during the extended 100 day's closure of the market due to lockdown (Kamei 2021). While economically better off women could survive through the lockdown, women who live by earning daily wages had to go through many struggles. Even when they could ask help from relatives, which they often could get, it was humiliating for them with their dignity getting crushed every single day. The divide between the better off and the underprivileged is again exaggerated with some of them, who had accessed to technology, being able to continue their business online, while the majority of them having to wait till it gets dark for them to come out by defying the lockdown and sell their items by making door-to-door visits (Kamei 2021). While the government did provide relief funds for the vendors, availing them is altogether a different story.

Talking to some of the vendors, Kamei found out that many of them not being a registered vendor could not apply for the benefits given by the government and even when registered, due to not owning a bank account, they could not avail the reliefs. Even so, the financial aid could never compensate or provide the reliefs to their woes. One emma narrated to him, about her experience of the lockdown, during which she could barely manage to survive while many of her friends were not lucky enough to do so. She felt anxious, depressed and extremely lonely, and was missing her old friends who had passed away (2021)

Conclusion

While some try to capture the importance of care work by weighing and finding means to calculate its market value with different methods and measures, others find it to be problematic to even measure them in market values as the degree of emotions and the relationship involved between the caregiver and the receiver just cannot be fully expressed in market values (Meagher 2002). Nonetheless, they all have the same goal and that is to make care work visible in order that it is taken into account in government policies which will help the care providers to be valued and make care sustainable and accessible to all including the providers. The paper would finally address the ways and means to make care visible and sustainable by taking examples of works of many scholars.

Meagher studies the overall best way to capture “care work” paid/ unpaid in order to make it visible the best way it can be by trying to bridge the gap between the social service providers and public administrators and government funders (2002). Most of the time it happens that the production based model encouraged by the funders that rely on the process of input to output to outcome is often valued over the relationship based approach which is actually favoured by the service providers themselves. This heavy reliance on the production model becomes problematic as it cannot measure the important aspects of care such as emotions and the morality involved. Further, the question of how to better capture and value care work at home or that of professionalism and quality in social care and finally that of social capital is analysed.

This research rules that care is a relationship-based process where both the party involved i.e. the caregiver and the receiver determine the service value which takes place outside the rule of the market and bureaucratic organisations. Besides seeing caregiving as a service process, it is also a labour process where caregiving is also a form of emotional labour or relational work (2002). Elaborating the concept of care to understand its positive qualities, seeking to articulate a new model of professionalism as caring and proposing organisational forms that encourage rather than discourage care are some of the focus recent feminists are involved in order to make care visible (2002).

Lokot and Bhatia gave four recommendations that would help care works by women visible by taking into account intersecting gendered, racial and class inequalities (2020). First, given the importance of documenting women's care roles which are also influenced by sex, race, migrant and economic statuses to understand the intersecting dimensions to women's care labor both during and after Covid-19 pandemic, they recommend policy-makers and researchers to focus on three spheres which include the home, the health and social care sector, and within the domestic work. Second, researchers should give explicit attention to inequalities in getting access to personal protective equipment, worksite safety and health care. Third, policy makers should ensure investments on policies that value women's care labor that focus on providing paid sick leave, parental leave policies to encourage men's role in caregiving, reducing gender pay gaps and ensuring legal protections for domestic workers. Finally, policy makers should ensure that the perspectives of women are taken into consideration with voices of women from diverse backgrounds being at the centre while developing short and long term responses to Covid-19 (2020, 3).

In the context of Manipur, however, in order to bring a change, the basic support and that of common beliefs, participations and organisations which would take the initiatives for the cause of women's rights are still lacking, due to which all the above mentioned recommendations would hardly be put to use and even if used, they are bound to be unproductive (Huirem 2013, 111).

The first and foremost thing that needs to be addressed, in my opinion, is the traditions and popular beliefs and values that people abide by. No society would seek for a change until and unless the people realise that it needs change to grow. The constant instilling of patriarchal values to people right from their birth through practices in the families, in movies, songs, literature and books etc. (Wahengbam 2022) leads to internalisation of such values and thus, thinking it is right, people protect such values in the name of culture and tradition. Thus, updating the old syllabus that is based on patriarchal values which put women in an inferior position with a syllabus that teaches students and children at educational institutions to respect other genders besides their own should be a welcome step. Literacy does not have a value until and unless one is gender literate. It is through this that a foundation for women's cause can be formed and only when we have set this foundation, will we be able to address the value of unpaid work and talk about making care visible and sustainable. People first need to question why unpaid care work has been assigned to only women when men are equally capable of doing it. Why do we normalise women working and fulfilling unpaid care jobs of cooking, taking care of children, cleaning, washing clothes even when she is unwell? What is it that makes women undeserving of care even when she is unwell when perfectly healthy members of the family would continue to enjoy her services?

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