

Women and Election in Manipur : Some Notes from the Field

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Abstract

The paper aims to highlight the reality of women's participation in electoral processes in Manipur and focuses on several issues that women encounter during their participation. Based on preliminary field research, it looks at some factors, perceived or otherwise, that hinder women in their effective and meaningful participation in elections. Women are mobilised as women in elections and gender remains an important parameter in determining the choice of voters and political workers in respect to supporting or not supporting women candidates. This paper highlights the role of women's networks in contributing to the massive participation of women as voters in Manipur; a feature that is exploited effectively by candidates during times of elections.

Keywords: Women, election, political participation, party workers, representation, Manipur.

Introduction:

Women in Manipur are best known for their proactive presence in society, with their engagements spreading over a wide spectrum of activities in the socio-cultural, economic, and political realms. Their predominant presence in economic activities is frequently revered in academic and journalistic exercises. Their collective mobilisation against the colonial British forces, in the first and second *Nupi Lal*¹ not only shaped the course of history of the state but also remained instrumental in instilling a tradition of potent women's agency in terms of countering unjust forces. Women's collective force under the banner *Meira Paibis*² also remains in the popular psyche, due to their relentless and sustained fight against state violence under AFSPA, and many other issues that confront the people of the state.

In the political sphere, numerous women are engaged in activities related to elections. They participate as workers, campaigners, and voters, at various levels and capacities. Despite these, the political participation of women in the state remains an insignificant reality. Only a few women participate and even fewer manage to be representatives in formal politics. The state has 9 women members of the state legislative assembly and an MP in over five decades of electoral politics from 1972-2022. In the 2022 state assembly election 17 women candidates contested elections from various political parties, out of which only 5 were elected

(Government of Manipur, Office of the Chief Electoral Officer). This remains so far, the highest number of women elected in the state legislative assembly of 60 members. On the contrary, political participation of women as voters in Manipur has always been high in numbers (87.99 percent in the recent assembly election of 2022), in most cases outnumbering the male voters.

This paper is an attempt to examine and highlight some reality of the political participation of women in Manipur. It focuses on women's engagement in politics, specifically in elections, as candidates, representatives, party workers, and voters. The paper is based on a preliminary field study in Assembly Constituencies (AC) having women candidates; namely, Oinam AC, Patsoi AC, Naoriya Pakhanglakpa AC, Yaiskul AC, in the 12th Manipur Assembly Election held during February and March 2022, to focus on the gender aspects of participation and support during elections. The paper used semi-structured interviews as a means to collect data from women political workers and voters. The paper also refers to interactions with intending candidates of the upcoming municipal and *panchayat* election scheduled in June 2023 and their political workers at the grass-root level to unearth stories of women in elections.

Election and participation of women:

Reasons for the low participation of women in politics are continuously discussed and deliberated in many academic literatures. While many of the postulated explanations for women's low participation hold relevance in different contexts, there is a need for continuous exploration of local and specific ways in which the dynamics of participation concerning women unfold. The most upheld primary reason behind the low participation of women in politics is the socio-cultural and ideological hindrances. Women have been socialized to believe that politics is a dirty game and primarily a coveted male domain. Decisions are meant to be taken by men and followed by women. They are expected to follow the line made by men (Khanna 2009: 57). Memma (name changed), a woman worker, remarked that if women work outside their homes, they must first deal with their husband, their family members, and then society (Personal interview, 25 Jun. 2022). Women are still looked down as not suitable for running elections. For engagements in the political sphere, women therefore, need to disentangle societal hindrances. The perception that women should act gentle, modest, humble, and obedient to their husband's commands continues to persist in the social and cultural milieu of Manipur. Society tends to question the morale of women once women are increasingly visible outside the house, but men are free to fulfill all their wishes, alleged by Ng. Bimola, an active worker in Oinam Constituency (Personal interview, 18 Oct. 2022). While interacting with women voters from Oinam constituency, it was also observed that they were reluctant even to express their views freely in front of their husbands and were less likely to give an opinion of their own.

a) Interest, knowledge, and resources:

Lack of interest, lack of education, political knowledge, family support, etc. have contributed to the low level of participation of women in politics. However, as expressed by some women

voters, the prevailing political environment also has thwarted the public, especially women from openly participating in activities relating to elections. It was found that there is consistent inhibition among several housewives that their government-employed husbands would face repercussions if they openly campaign for a candidate other than the ruling parties' candidate. For instance, Leima (name changed), was concerned that her husband might get transferred to far-off hill districts in case she openly support and campaigned for candidates contending against the ruling party MLAs (Personal interview, 1 Oct. 2022). Thus they show little or no interest in involving themselves in election-related activities. While the same wives of employed husbands are categorized as privileged (in the economic sense) by most women political workers, who opined that these women do not need to actively participate as political workers. The trend of associating women political workers with lower economic backgrounds is largely seen in this context; whereby the motive and interest for involvement, among other things, is their practical concern for direct economic benefits for their households.

It is worth mentioning that several women campaigners started to participate only when their husbands started to endorse a candidate for the election. Most women are influenced by their husbands in deciding their political choices of candidates, level, and nature of involvement in political activities. Ibemhal Devi (name changed), said, "We do not have proper knowledge about the electoral process; we just follow the advice of our husband and family who are more experienced than us" (Personal interview, 9 Jun. 2022). Apart from the dependent choice factor, the determining role of the family support factor in women's active participation is also largely visible among women workers. "If we do not get help from them, we might not even come forward; they help us when we are in doubt", added Babita Devi (name changed), another women worker from Oinam AC (Personal interview, 12 Jun. 2022). A general lack of political awareness and exposure among women, not only makes women dependent on the rationale and choice of their male counterparts but also limits them from fully participating in political activities and exercising full individual agency.

Availability of resources is another key criterion that determines the participation of women in politics. Time and money remain the deciding factors for a candidate to contest an election. Needless to reiterate that the time-consuming work associated with household activities is carried out solely by women coupled with child-rearing responsibilities. Corrin and Chhibber remarked that women still perform the lion's share of domestic tasks such as cooking and cleaning and are the primary caregivers for children; patterns that may deprive women of the free time required to participate in politics (qtd. in Paxton et al. 2007: 267). These factors continue to be liabilities for women who want to participate in politics. While interviewing women workers, it was found that only a few of them aspire to contest the election, but never really worked to actualise it due to a lack of resources. It is also important to point out that their aspirations soared only as high as the local-level elections. Ngasepam Bimola Devi, Takyel Zila Parishad under Patsoi AC, expressed that resources are always lacking. At the same time, the question of financial assistance and sponsorship remains bleak. Most women join politics at a later age when they are comparatively free from household

activities and commitments (Personal interview, 18 Oct. 2022). The likeliness to engage in public works is more when they complete their 'essential and fundamental' familial role. Some of the respondents also hold the view that unmarried women are better positioned to involve in politics because of the absence of compulsory household responsibilities. They are therefore perceived to be comparatively free to engage in political works, having more liberty to decide on their affairs. Nongthongbam Promo, Zila Parishad from Lamsang AC, chose to remain single as she wanted to be in politics from childhood (Personal interview, 18 Oct. 2022). This rationale reflects the magnitude of traditional and cultural responsibilities women are subjected to, whose weight deters women from engaging in any other expression of their free will and effective association with activities and aspirations outside the home.

b) Role of Political parties

The role of political parties in encouraging and supporting women's political participation and representation should also be taken into account. Women are more prone to be treated as campaigners and voter mobilisers by political parties during elections. As a result of which women participate as attendees in huge numbers in political rallies and meetings. It is rather not new to assert that political parties practice discriminatory and gender exclusion policies in allocating seats for contesting elections. Indian electoral politics reveals the exclusionary trend in providing space to women to participate as a candidate in national and state level election that causally stem from their marginalization within the party hierarchy and structure (Rai 2011:50). The decision not to allot the seat to women by political parties at the national and state level electoral has been contributed to lack of winnability of women (Deshpande 2004: 5433). At another level, the elected candidates, including women, at the state legislative assembly are accused of being hesitant to sponsor women candidates in the local level election within their constituency. In many instances, aspiring women local leaders are used as voter mobilisers in state assembly elections by candidates with the promise of supporting her during a local election. Despite such promises, women political workers have been rarely supported outside reserved seats. Sumila Ningthoujam, a social and active political worker from Oinam constituency, revealed the same situation even though they sincerely displayed their capabilities of not just mobilizing voters during the general election but through their prolonged engagement with people and electoral process (Personal interview, 12 Jun. 2022). The preference of male candidates over women candidates is manifested at various junctures which not only kills the initiative and political interest of women at large but also induces a sense of incompetence and lack of agency if not supported by the elected MLA in their candidature at the local level election.

The absence of political role models or efficient candidates within political party structures and outside, who can instigate interest among women to engage in politics, can also contribute to the low participation of women. Role model candidates are those who can mobilize, inspire, and educate persons to participate in electoral activities. In many instances, it is visible that the support of women voters to women candidate is widely absent because of the lack of personality to inspire women and lack of common women agenda. It is

worthwhile to note at this juncture that speeches given by Thounaojam Brinda, a candidate from Yaiskul assembly constituency, intrigued many by her personality especially her ability to straightforwardly place her opinion without any fear of repercussion. The fact that she served as a Police officer in the Government of Manipur, who contributed significantly to the 'war against drugs' campaign is still fresh in the minds of the people. She emerged as a role model for many women during her campaigning days and was seen by many as strong-willed, fearless women who can speak her mind in the face of great power. Such a figure also repents the limitation of being a woman candidate and noted that only a few women contest the election because women lack money and muscle power. Women do not have the goon or *gundagiri* background (Bhattacharjee 2022). The fact that such parameters still hold precedence in Indian electoral politics, denies women their accessibility and free expression of democratic rights.

c) Networks of women

Political participation of women in Manipur is found to be mainly concentrated at the grass-root levels as one observes a large number of women participating as voters, active workers, campaigners, voter mobilizers, etc. Seeing the large number of women coming out in public, one might perceive that women in the state, especially in the valley areas, seem to effectively exercise their political rights. However, this number does not correlate with the reality of women actually and consciously enjoying political agency. It would not be wrong to state that most of the women remain as 'shadow supporters'. The rationale is that most women choose to support the political scene rather than take an active leading role. They mostly prefer to work in assisting other members in election-related works and take pleasure in working as voter mobilizers i.e., party workers or campaigners.

It needs to specially highlight here that women can impressively gather a crowd in a short period even though many women workers remain passive followers and without much agency. One needs to take note of group dynamics that are at play when it comes to women voters, supporters, and workers. The existence of old social linkages of kinship and recently developed networks like self-help groups, *meirapaibis*, and other associations play an instrumental role in influencing women's choices. The decision to attend a political meeting is not always about individual choice but rather a group decision that can mobilise a certain number of women who are interlinked by certain group dynamics mentioned above. Women are more likely to be influenced by close neighbours, relatives, and friends to join as active workers, voter mobilisers, etc., and remain within their network. The multitude of women participating in activities related to elections does not necessarily equal the qualitative political participation of women. The real sense of political participation comes into the picture when those women understand the politics and rationale behind their choice of action or inaction.

To exploit this network of women during elections, many candidates encourage the formation of short-term women groups, either taking the name of the *meira paibis* or otherwise. These small groups of women were seen mostly enacting the role of a vigilante force in their respective localities and streets, claiming that they are keeping a check on any miscreants

and anti-social elements during election campaigns. Basanti Devi (name changed), from Oinam AC, remarked with humour that they were not just sitting idly in camps and *meira shangs* but were trying to find out who supports who (Personal interview, 12 Jun. 2022). The candidates often target the already existing *meira paibi* groups of each locality or form new ad-hoc groups with the promise of granting them financial support for their group endeavours. It has been observed that the ad-hoc groups will eventually take the name of the *meira paibi* in their activity of sitting at *meira shangs*, (make shift huts, where *meira paibis* sit) every night religiously only until the elections. In some assembly constituencies, women were encouraged to form groups, and submit their names to the candidate. For instance, in Wangkhei AC, candidates will help open a group account with the promise that once he/she wins, he/she will ensure the granting of financial support for the group members in their small self-help economic ventures (Ebenungshi [name changed] personal interview, 17 Sept. 2022). Most of these women are either ill-informed or not informed at all about the actual benefits that they are being promised (Emem, personal interview, 12 Jul. 2022). Women fall prey to a meagre sum of money that they get during their short membership of the above-mentioned ad-hoc groups. This meagre sum is attractive and convincing enough for many women to sway their political choices.

Political parties and candidates used different tactics or strategies to influence women. More women are seen participating in the election campaign and related activities. Many have argued that the increased participation of women as voters and campaigners or worker is the result of the political party's mobilization techniques. It was observed from the preliminary fieldwork that there are numerous women's organisations or committees formed during election times mainly in support of candidates or political parties. National political parties like Congress and BJP have their own women committees like Manipur Pradesh Mahila Committee and BJP Mahila Morcha. Several candidates also formed their own women's committees in their constituencies based on locality or wards. For instance, in Patsoi assembly constituency, former MLA Akoijam Mirabai has forty-eight units of women's committees under her attention. According to her party worker, the broad umbrella women's committee is popularly known as Congress Mahila Committee. It is bifurcated into Blocks Mahila Committee and Units. The members of the Block Mahila Committee meet regularly on the first Sunday of every month even after the end of the election. The women put up several issues to the attention of their political leaders. In one way, these committees make direct communication links between their political leaders and the women. A similar women's organisation also exists in Naoriya Pakhanglakpa constituency namely Langthabal Lep Awang Leikai Nupi group. While the women's committees of Patsoi are affiliated to the Manipur Pradesh Mahila Committee, the women committees of Naoriya Pakhanglakpa are reportedly not formally attached to any political party, but rather fashioned by S Kebi (candidate, now MLA) for communication convenience in her constituency. These women's committees get financial aid from the candidates to create livelihood opportunities for themselves. Candidates would buy weaving machines, sewing machines, etc. which can serve as income sources for its members. In consideration of the above benefits, the members are prepared to present

themselves wherever the candidates require them. The women's committees' leaders would send out information about political meetings and rallies and its members would assemble themselves for the meetings or rallies.

d) Role of Gender

Gender does have a certain role in terms of motivating women voters and political workers and in the choices they make. Seltzer et al., Dolan, Smith, and Fox have pointed out that the gender of a candidate matters more to women voters as they prefer to see women as candidates more than male voters (qtd. in Paxton et al. 2007: 272). The gender of a candidate can be one parameter of deciding whether one wants to actively associate as a worker for that candidate, especially concerning women. Many women became workers because they wanted to support women candidates. The most commonly used statement by women workers is '*Nupi na nupi support tougadabane*' (A woman should support women) while justifying their decision to support women candidates. During fieldwork in Oinam assembly constituency, it was found that women workers tend to view that women candidates could easily relate to women's issues and problems which are frequently undermined by male candidates. It is also believed that women candidates could bring more women-centric agendas which were previously ignored by male candidates.

There are also instances when the gender card seemingly gave an edge to women candidates. The former MLA Akoijam Mirabai had been contesting elections since 2000. In her initial years, she was defeated thrice before her first win in 2012. After her third defeat, the larger visible public perception in the constituency was that she, being a woman, would stop contesting elections because of her continuous defeat. However, people were astounded by her undeterred efforts, when she contested the fourth time. People became sympathetic towards her, about her being a woman and that too an unmarried woman. This sympathetic attitude of voters, especially elders and women voters, gave a big push that helped her win the election in 2012, among other factors. Contrary to this public perception, her election defeat in 2022 can mostly be attributed to anti-incumbency and the rising BJP wave. However, it was observed that certain sections of the people alleged her of poor performance, and the reason for such inefficiency is again attributed to her gender. Again in Oinam assembly constituency, sections of the voters expressed similar opinions regarding the inefficiency of women candidates. The prevailing notion is that even if women candidates are elected, they cannot perform significantly in a legislative house full of men. One of the respondents, Tombi Devi (name changed), interviewed on 12 June 2022 expressed that although she supported a women candidate in the recent 2022 assembly election, at times she feels that it is better to elect a male candidate as the capability and efficiency of elected women candidates remains doubtful in a male-dominated arena.

On the other hand, most of the elected candidates (both women and men) in the state legislature are reluctant to support and stage women candidates in the local level elections outside reserved seats. Sumila Ningthoujam alleged that even when the elected representative is a woman, they are hesitant in supporting women candidates outside the reserved seats in

the local election citing the winnability factors (Personal interview, 20 Jun 2022). Women, therefore, are not given the chance to develop a sustained political career and constituency, due to the rotation in reserved seats and also the general unwillingness to nominate women candidates in unreserved seats. Even proxy women candidates do start acquiring political knowledge and interest in the process. However, her opportunity to continue her interest and career is cut short as she has to give up the seat to her husband when it becomes an unreserved one in the next election. Keeping this short-lived prospect in mind, one of the respondents, Ibethoi (name changed) from the Naoriya Pakhanglakpa AC who was also a former member of the *Panchayat* claimed that it is better to enjoy a peaceful, stable family rather than to stand against her husband in power politics (Personal interview 29 Jun.2022).

Acquiring Political Skills

Requisite skills for a political career are often acquired through engaging in non-electoral activities such as serving as a volunteer in civil society organisations and social movement activism. Fallon, Bauer, and Britton remarked that women's participation in women's movements and in grass-root activism also imparts them with political experience and political ambition (qtd. in Paxton et al. 2007: 268). Nameirakpam Sunita Leima, an intending candidate in the upcoming Municipal corporation election, reflected that being an Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) worker has allowed her to travel every nook and corner of her locality, thus gaining awareness of problems that people face directly (Personal interview, 1 Oct. 2022). Such engagement had given her a direct impetus to contribute something to the people, which for her, is translated into her willingness to contest elections. On the other hand, Ngasepam Bimola Leima, a Zila Parishad member, born and brought up in a conservative family, expressed her love for reading books, reciting poems, and writing articles for the local newspapers. However, she realised that writing about social issues without going out of her four walls was absurd. This realization gave her a push to proactively participate in local issues and thus became Secretary for their locality *meira paibis* organisations. Gradually the public prompted her to contest the *Panchayat* election after seeing her active engagement (Personal interview, 27 Aug. 2022). She won the local level election numerous times, but she feels she lacks not only time and resources but the confidence required for contesting state assembly elections. Therefore she continues to contest in *Panchayat* elections with her aspiration soaring only as high as serving the role of the local representative of her area.

The women's committees which were formed during assembly election times also provide a platform for women to acquire the necessary skills to mobilize the public if one desires to contest in local elections. The field interaction reveals that most of the active women political workers tend to have the desire to contest in the local elections. They gave public speeches, campaigned for their candidates, and mobilized the public for political rallies, meetings, and house-to-house campaigns. They acquire the necessary skills and political networks which can be employed in the future. One respondent from Patsoi AC, Kshetrimayum Shanti Devi narrated how she used to be a shy person before engaging as the political worker for a candidate. In the process of following the candidate, she started to

attend political meetings, awareness programmes, and skill training programmes. As she started listening to speeches given by renowned personalities in public meetings, she experienced her confidence being boosted, and later prompted her to give speeches in local political meetings. Gradually she became the Secretary of her locality *meira paibi* organisations with her newly acquired confidence and speaking skills (personal interview, 13 Jun. 2022).

Concluding Remarks

The participation of citizens in democratic processes is crucial for developing a viable democracy. Ideally, both males and females are expected to equally partake in influencing political decisions and policies that affect their lives. Despite this women have been historically excluded, and even with the same political rights the number of women engaging in formal politics remains low. Moreover, the scanty participation in politics is also mostly concentrated at the grass root level.

There are various hindrances to the active engagement of women in politics. Women have been demoralized to engage in electoral politics but ironically they are also sent out by their families to attend political meetings and rally as representatives of the family. While lack of resources, interest, and confidence remain key reasons for women's low participation, the general perception of the winnability of men over women contributes further to the problem. Despite the obstacles, more women are starting to engage themselves as active workers and voters in elections wherein many cases their political participation is seen to be hugely motivated by the ad-hoc fulfilment of the sustenance needs of their family. Nonetheless, one cannot deny the fact that women have increasingly begun to take cognizance of their political rights. Not only did they develop political ambition, but many women also picked up the courage to contest in elections, neglecting many counter currents. The engagement of women in voluntary organizations and social movements has helped them to acquire the necessary political skills, confidence, and awareness significantly. The increasing number of women engaging in politics is a good indication of a desirable social change. However political empowerment has a long way to go.

Notes:

- ¹ The first *Nupi Lan* (1904) and second *Lupi Lan* (1939) meaning 'women's war' were organized women's resistance actions against the British colonial forces in Manipur. In 1904, women collectively protested against the order issued by the British authority to revive a system of *Lallup* (a form of forced labour), wherein men will be forced to perform free labour. Thousands of women gathered at the *Khairamband bazaar* and protested forcing the government to reconsider the order. The second *Nupi Lal* was triggered by the overall nature of the administration of the British, however, the immediate cause can be attributed to the administration's facilitating the over-export of rice irrespective of the shortage for domestic consumption, thus inducing an artificial famine in the state.
- ² The *Meira Paibis* meaning 'women torch bearer' denotes a form of collective mobilisation of women which started in 1980 against increasing state violence upon the civilian population in the name of counter-insurgency operations. This mobilisation became a sustained movement that continues to fight

the issue until today. The Meira Paibis now constitute a viable and proactive civil society component in Manipur, which engages with any issues of the collective.

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