



Gender Equality: The Socio-Economic Status of Women in The Galo Community, Arunachal Pradesh

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ABSTRACT: Gender equality is “women, men, girls and boys must enjoy equal rights, resources, opportunities and protections. It means that women, men, girls and boys have equal conditions, treatment and opportunities for realizing their full potential, human rights and dignity and contributing to socio-economic, cultural and political development” according to United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund. Equality doesn’t mean that men and women will become the same but that women’s and men’s rights, responsibilities and opportunities is not depended on whether they are born male or female. Gender equality signifies the equal recognition and appreciation of both the similarities and differences between men and women, as well as the roles they fulfill in society. The Indian Constitution enshrines this principle through the Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Directive Principles of State Policy, and Fundamental Duties. Beyond guaranteeing equal rights for women, the Constitution also empowers the government to take affirmative actions to address gender disparities.

Although the Constitution of India contains numerous provisions to uphold gender equality and justice, these provisions have often been rendered ineffective for various reasons. While women are constitutionally guaranteed equal rights, opportunities, and protections, the reality remains starkly different. The status of women in the Galo society of Arunachal Pradesh reflects this discrepancy. Although the extent and nature of inequality and discrimination may vary, women continue to occupy a disadvantaged position socially and economically. The socio-economic and political marginalization of women has persisted throughout history. In fact, this marginalization is a harsh reality that has been both consciously and unconsciously practiced within the Galo tribe, whether directly or indirectly. This paper aims to examine the distinct nature of gender inequality in Galo society and propose suitable measures to promote and strengthen gender equality.

KEYWORDS: Alienation, Customary Practices, Gender Justice, Inequality, Women.

INTRODUCTION

Gender equality is the equal valuing by society of the similarities and the differences of men and women, and the roles they play. It is based on women and men being full partners in the home, community and society. Equality does not mean that women and men will become the same but that women’s and men’s rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born male or female¹.

“Gender equality is more than a goal in itself. It is a precondition for meeting the challenge of reducing poverty, promoting sustainable development, and building good governance.”- Former, *UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan*

The United Nations (UN) defines gender equality as the state in which "people of all genders have equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities." This idea underpins the idea that gender-based discrimination hinders both social development and individual potential.

Martha Nussbaum (2000), for instance, argues for a model of gender equality grounded in human capabilities—where all individuals, regardless of gender, are free to pursue a life of their choosing, under conditions of fairness and equal opportunity. In sociological contexts, scholars like Judith Butler (1990) have further analyzed how societal norms and structures construct gender identities and how gender equality requires challenging these norms to provide equal access to power, resources, and recognition across genders.

¹ Glossary of Terms and Concepts, UNICEF, Regional Office for South Asia November 2017.



However, in a developing country like India study on gender is more pertinent on the perception 'Gender Inequality than Gender Equality'. Historically it is evident that Indian Society is patriarchal where there is common practice of gender discrimination knowingly or unknowingly. The Galo community of Arunachal Pradesh is no exception, even though the female folk seemed to have more freedom and rights than other parts of India. Nevertheless, we cannot deny the fact that there is an alienation of women in various societal practices and events. As a result, gender inequality is profoundly rooted in Galo society where women are on disadvantages side.

At present gender study has attained paramount importance globally. As gender studies foster a more inclusive, just, and informed society by encouraging critical thinking about how gender affects people's lives and how structures can be reformed to create better opportunities for all. One of the core goals of gender studies is to advocate for gender equality and social justice. It challenges discriminatory practices and policies, working to create a world where people of all genders can live freely, equally, and without fear of oppression. It is not only to understand the impact of gender in shaping human lives but also to challenge and dismantle systems of inequality, advocating for a world where gender does not limit a person's opportunities, identity, or right. Thus, it's an endeavour to establish just and balance society. Gender equality has achieved a key position on the international political agenda over the last three decades. It is now widely effective ideal, and its pursuits are represented as a fundamental requirement of social justice².

The United Nations and international human rights organisations have declared that women are entitled to enjoy all these rights, freedoms, and associations on the same basis as men.³ According to United Nations Deputy Secretary General Asha Rose Migiros, "When women are empowered, all of society will get benefits."⁴ In India, women enjoy a range of constitutional rights that are designed to promote gender equality, protect their dignity, and ensure their participation in all spheres of life. These rights are enshrined in the Indian Constitution as well as various laws and legal provisions. Fundamental Rights such Article 14, 15, 16, 21, 23, 24 and various other laws like The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005), the Equal Remuneration Act (1976), The Sexual Harassment of Women at the Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act (2013), The Dowry Prohibition Act (1961), The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act (2013), The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (2006), etc. are there to ensure women dignity, safety and right, ultimately help to achieve gender equality. Nevertheless, these rights form a critical framework for gender equality in India, although challenges remain in terms of their implementation and societal attitudes. Even so, these constitutional protections and legal safeguards provide women with a basis for demanding equal treatment and justice.

1.1: Objectives of Study

The study has following objectives

- To understand overview of gender equality.
- To comprehend role of women in Galo tribe of Arunachal Pradesh.
- To draw way forwards for ingraining gender equality.

1.2: Methodology:

Both primary and secondary sources provided data for the study. Structured and unstructured interviews, together with observational methods, served as the main sources of data for the research. An appropriately constructed and organized collection of open-ended questionnaires selected using a stratified random sampling technique served as the study's primary instrument. Sample size of sixty (50) have collected from Aalo circle of West Siang district, Arunachal Pradesh. Further, sixty (50) sample size

² Judith Squires, *The New Politics of Gender Equality*, Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills Basingstoke, Hampshire 175 fifth Avenue, New York, 2007, p.1, retrieved from <https://googlescholar.com>, accessed on 31/07/2021.

³ Julie Ballington, *Empowering Women for Stronger Political Parties: A Guidebook to Promote Women's Political Participation*, United Nations Development Programme national democratic institute for international Affairs, NDI and UNDP, 2012, p.7, retrieved from <https://www.ndi.org>, accessed on 23-02-2021.

⁴ Samuel Cole, *Increasing Women's Political Participation in Liberia Challenges and Potential Lessons from India, Rwanda and South Africa*, International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), Washington, D.C, U.S.A, 2011, p.6, retrieved from <https://www.ifes.org>, accessed on 06-03-2017.



were split into thirty (25) each from rural and Urban respectively. From pertinent government Acts, reports, records, publications, and other available published and unpublished material, secondary data was collected.

1.3: Historical Context on gender in Galo Community

Galo society has very deep-rooted sight on gender. Traditionally gender encompasses the roles and behaviours that society considers appropriate for individuals based on their perceived sex, such as being masculine or feminine. Galo views often assumes that there are only two genders: male and female. Study on gender inequality is more suitable to describe gender-based issues in Galo society. The unequal treatment or perceptions of individuals based on their gender is clearly prevalent. This concept highlights the systemic differences in access to resources, rights, and opportunities that are often experienced by women and men due to societal norms, policies, and practices that privilege one gender over others. At its core, gender inequality manifests in various forms, such as male child preference, limited access to resources, inheritance, underrepresentation in leadership roles, and the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes about the abilities or roles of different genders. It is often rooted in longstanding cultural, political, and economic structures that perpetuate gender-based discrimination and disadvantage. Ultimately, it reflects the broader social dynamics where men hold more power, privilege, and opportunity than women, contributing to societal imbalances in community.

Gender-based disadvantage and discrimination are embedded in customs and traditions that ultimately reflected in customary laws. According to mythology, the customary laws of Galo were first laid down by *Abo Tani* (first human being) and were followed by his offspring's.⁵ Most of the social customs and traditions were obeyed habitually by the people. It was believed that if they failed to do so the wrath of supernatural force would punish them in a very vicious way. It can be said that most of the time people follow and obey customary laws not by choice but out of fear. From the very childhood, everyone's been imparted with those customs and traditions which eventually helps person to become well oriented with the customary laws of the society. As such customary laws of Galo on gender is more advantageous for male. Women like in most of the societies face disadvantages and sometimes discrimination that is deep rooted in the society.

1.4: Role and Rights of Galo Women

Women in Galo society enjoy a significant role, both within the family and in the community. Their position is largely defined by a combination of cultural traditions and gender roles that promote a sense of equality, especially in comparison to other communities. They have historically enjoyed significant social status and contribute actively to the community.

1.4.1: Social Role and Rights: Women are the caretakers of the home and children. They manage household activities, including cooking, cleaning, and ensuring that the family functions smoothly. They are responsible for raising children, ensuring their education, and taking care of their emotional and physical well-being. Galo women are known for their strong work ethic and great sense of hospitality. The social role and responsibility of Galo women are deeply embedded in the fabric of the tribe's way of life. However, as the society is patriarchal in many ways Galo women faces social hindrances and discriminations. Social discrimination starts with very existence of women where they are acknowledged as liability to their opposite gender (father, husband, and brother). The society considered them as daughter, sister, and wife than a simple individual. Woman is basically known by her husband's name or her father's name. As such identity of women is chronically attached to their male member whether father or husband. Solitary women like unmarried and widow do struggle to have their identity intact or to establish recognition in society. Subsequently, they lose their touch in social role and rights.

The Galo tribe, a prominent indigenous group of Arunachal Pradesh, maintains a patrilineal social structure, where kinship and descent are traced exclusively through the male line. This practice plays a crucial role in shaping gender identity, social dynamics, and family structures within the community. The distinct tradition of male-centered genealogy is fundamental to the tribe's identity, but it also influences a range of social practices, some of which lead to challenges related to gender inequality and social unrest. Male Lineage as the Foundation of society, a person's family name and identity are derived from the father's name. The Galo have a unique naming system where a person's name begins with the last syllable of their father's name. This practice

⁵ Mr. Tojom Lollen, Gaon Bura, aged-76, Kombo Pomte Village, scheduled interview on 23rd November, 2020 (Hereafter referred to as ITL)



makes genealogy and family ties publicly recognizable, but it also reinforces the importance of male lineage in the community. The continuation of the family line is seen as a male responsibility, as only the male descendants are given prominence in the clan structure. This structure places the male head of the family in a dominant position, and their legacy is considered more significant than that of female members.

The preference for male children is a notable consequence of the patrilineal system. Sons are expected to carry forward the family name, maintain the lineage, and inherit property. As such, the birth of a male child is seen as a major source of pride, while daughters are often viewed as temporary members of their family until they are married off. The strong preference for male children can lead to gender imbalances within families and communities. It often results in an underappreciation of daughters, who, despite contributing significantly to the household through work and care, are not seen as the continuation of the family line. This cultural bias can undermine the value of women in the eyes of their own families and communities.

The male-child preference embedded in society gives rise to several social evils and contributes to inequality between men and women such as polygamy, adultery, domestic violence, gender discrimination, crime against women and social unrest.

1.4.2: Cultural Role: Galo women occupy a central and highly respected role in the religious, cultural, and spiritual life of the Galo tribe. Their involvement in traditional rituals, ceremonies, and festivals is not just a participatory function but one that upholds and perpetuates the tribe's cultural identity and heritage. Their multifaceted roles in religious and cultural practices are crucial in ensuring the continuity of Galo traditions across generations. Women are integral to the performance of rituals and religious ceremonies. These include annual harvest festivals, rites of passage, and ancestral veneration ceremonies, all of which are deeply ingrained in Galo society. Women actively participate in organizing and conducting these rituals, ensuring they are performed with precision and respect for tradition. One of the most significant events in Galo society is the harvest festival, which celebrates the fruits of labor and honors the gods and ancestors for their blessings. Galo women are not just participants; they are often central to the success of the festival.

Cultural Leadership Roles: In Galo society, certain women serve as spiritual leaders, taking on the role of priests or priestesses who conduct rituals and prayers. These women hold significant spiritual authority, and their role is integral in maintaining the connection between the community and the divine. Their responsibilities may include performing rituals for health, prosperity, and community well-being, and they are respected figures within the tribe for their spiritual wisdom. They are celebrated as folk singers and dancers. They perform traditional songs that narrate the tribe's history, mythology, and values, often during festivals and ceremonial events. Their voices carry the stories of the tribe, and through song, they preserve the tribe's oral history. The dances performed by Galo women are not merely entertainment but are laden with symbolic meaning, each movement representing different aspects of life, nature, or spiritual beliefs. One of the most important roles of women is being Custodians of Oral Tradition. The oral tradition is deeply rooted in the belief that knowledge and wisdom must be passed down from the older generation to the younger generation. Women, particularly grandmothers and mothers, are often the bearers of this knowledge. They share stories not just for entertainment, but to teach the younger generation about the tribe.

Despite women playing significant roles and carrying important responsibilities in society, they are still often regarded as subordinate to men, which is an issue that requires reflection and a deeper understanding. There remains a deeply ingrained societal view in many places that women are somehow subordinate to men. This perspective is not only outdated but also unfair and limiting for both genders.

1.4.3: Economic Role and Rights: Women manage household resources, including food production, animal husbandry, and overall household upkeep. Art and craft serve as a major source of income for them, with weaving being the dominant economic activity. They weave traditional garments such as *Gale* (a type of bottom wear for women), *Tango* (a men's blazer), shawl, and other clothing items. Bamboo is a primary material for their crafts, with handmade products like ornaments and decorative items being commonly crafted from it. These goods are often sold in local markets or exchanged within the community, contributing to the household's income. In this way, art and craft play a vital role in their economy.

Women play an integral role in the agricultural system, particularly in shifting cultivation (locally known as "jhum") and wet rice cultivation. They are involved in sowing, tending, and harvesting crops such as rice, maize, millet, and vegetables. Agriculture is the main economic activity of the Galo tribe and is primarily subsistence-based. However, women also engage in cash crop cultivation, especially vegetables, to generate household income. Though the economic roles and rights of Galo women may have evolved with modern influences, many of their traditional economic activities remain vital to the sustenance of their



families and community. The continued challenge lies in ensuring that their rights are protected, and their contributions recognized, both within their culture and in the broader society. They have the right to participate in economic affairs, although their roles are often more focused on domestic and community-level activities.

Despite the significant economic contributions of women in various sectors, including agriculture, household management, and craftsmanship, their economic rights are often limited or unrecognized. This disparity highlights the need for greater recognition and protection of women's economic entitlements, ensuring they receive equal access to resources, ownership, and opportunities for financial independence. Following are conditions of women with regards to economic rights.

a) *Hijeh* (Inheritance Right): Traditionally, inheritance rights only pass-through male lineage. The society has always maintained a firm approach to the inheritance of parental properties, with gender-based distribution being a fundamental practice. In addition to gender, factors like seniority and the individual's behavior are also taken into consideration. The properties are broadly divided into two categories: movable and immovable. Immovable properties are further divided into two groups: high-value and important assets such as *Dasi* (an antique traditional saucepan symbolizing prosperity), *Yoksi* (traditional sword), *Tale* (traditional brass bowl), *Barte-Barba, Ber, Boreh* (traditional brass plates), and lower-value assets like traditional bowls, plates, trays, and various ornaments and beads, including *Doksi, Dogne, Lisum, Dokpin, and Raaqi*. Traditionally, the eldest male member of the family inherits the most valuable movable and immovable properties. It has been observed that both the eldest and youngest male members tend to inherit the best assets, but this is not a strict rule. Ultimately, the son who takes responsibility for caring for the parents often inherits the most valuable properties.

The customary laws of the Galo community have historically not recognized a daughter's right to inherit immovable properties. Instances of a daughter inheriting paternal property are extremely rare, typically occurring only when there is no male child. In such cases, the property would usually pass to a male relative of the same clan, essentially adopting the responsibility of the parents. As a result, a daughter's inheritance of immovable assets like land or forest is more circumstantial than customary. However, daughters do have the right to inherit certain movable assets, such as their mother's traditional ornaments—bead necklaces, earrings, bangles, and others. Yet, this right is conditional upon specific rituals and customs. The daughter must arrange a feast and offer the requisite *Hobo* (Bos Frontalis) and *Hoi* (cow) to her parents before she can inherit her mother's possessions.⁶

1.4.5: Political Status of Women: "Political participation refers to the activities of citizens that seek to influence the policies, functioning, and selection of government authorities"⁷. The concept of political participation refers to the voluntary activities undertaken by individuals in free and equal participation to influence the government and representative democracy.⁸ The perspectives of women in politics and their participation are prerequisites for true democracy and contribute to good governance.⁹ The United Nations perceives the necessity of promoting the rights of women to participate in every electoral process. It is important to note that electoral rights mean the right to vote, the right to hold public office at all levels of government, the right to assembly and association, the right to participate in the formulation of government policy, the right to freedom of expression, and the right to take part in the conduct of public affairs.¹⁰

The political participation of Galo women has historically been minimal, which is a striking irony given their significant role in the community's social and economic life. For centuries, women's involvement in public affairs has either been restricted or entirely excluded. One of the most prominent examples of this exclusion is that women were neither allowed nor invited to become members of the *Keba*, the indigenous governing body that plays a key role in decision-making within the community. This exclusion

⁶ Dakto Lollen, aged 55, Teacher, Kombo Pomte Village, scheduled interview on 24th March, 2021 (Hereafter referred to a IDL)

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Jan W. Van Deth, Conceptualizing political participation, Macmillan Publishers, Acta Politica, Vol. 49, (3), 2014, p.351, retrieved from <https://scholar.google.com>, accessed on 25-07-2021.

⁹ Julie Ballington, Empowering Women for Stronger Political Parties: A Guidebook to Promote Women's Political Participation, United Nations Development Programme national democratic institute for international Affairs, NDI and UNDP, 2012, p.7, retrieved from <https://www.ndi.org>, accessed on 23-02-2021.

¹⁰ Carina Perelli, Women and Elections guide to promoting the participation of women in elections, United Nations department of public information, 2005, p.10, retrieved from <https://www.un.org>, accessed on 19-07-2021.



reflects the broader societal belief that women's roles were confined to the domestic sphere, with limited access to formal political power.

However, women do have some participation in public matters, albeit in very limited and passive ways. They are allowed to file complaints or serve as witnesses in matters brought before the *Keba*, providing testimony or evidence. In addition, women are responsible for the hospitality and care of attendees at *Keba* events, handling tasks like catering and providing lodging. While these duties are essential to the functioning of public events, they are often seen as secondary to the formal political and decision-making roles that are reserved for men.

As a result, women's participation in public affairs has largely been that of caregivers—supporting the event logistics and maintaining social harmony, yet without any direct influence over the decisions made or actions taken by the *Keba*. This limited involvement highlights the patriarchal structure that still exists, where women are seen as integral to the community's well-being but are excluded from the power structures that shape its governance. The absence of women's voices in decision-making bodies means that their interests and perspectives are often underrepresented or overlooked, contributing to the perpetuation of gender inequality in political spheres.

1.4.6: Gender inequality as Intrinsic and Extrinsic challenge

Gender inequality in Galo society is both an intrinsic and extrinsic challenge, deeply embedded within cultural norms and societal structures. Intrinsically, Galo women are central to the community's social, cultural, and economic life, fulfilling vital roles in family care, agriculture, craft, and religious practices. Despite this, their societal status remains subordinate due to a patriarchal system that ties their identity to male relatives and limits their access to political power and inheritance rights. Women's roles are typically confined to domestic and caregiving responsibilities, with little to no influence in decision-making processes or political participation, such as in the *Keba*, the governing body.

Extrinsically, gender-based discrimination manifests in the unequal distribution of resources and opportunities. Women's inheritance rights are restricted, with immovable property generally passing through male lineage. While women can inherit some movable assets, this often comes with burdensome rituals and customs. In political spheres, women have minimal participation, with their involvement limited to caregiving and supporting event logistics, leaving their voices and perspectives underrepresented in governance. The challenge is not just cultural but systemic, perpetuating gender inequality at both the familial and societal levels and hindering women from fully exercising their rights and contributing to decision-making processes.

1.5: Way Forwards

To address gender inequality in Galo society, a multi-pronged approach that respects cultural heritage while fostering inclusivity and empowerment is essential. Here are some logical way -forwards according to study:

- 1) **Cultural Awareness and Sensitization:** Organize cultural dialogue forums where community members, including men and women, discuss the importance of gender equality. These should be led by trusted community leaders to bridge the gap between tradition and modern ideals of equality. Promote awareness about the value of women's contributions in all spheres, including political, economic, and social roles. This should include both formal education and community-based workshops to limit patriarchal norms and highlight the positive impact of empowering women.
- 2) **Empowerment Programs for Women:** Provide leadership and political training for women so they can actively participate in governance and decision-making. This will help them gain the confidence and skills necessary to be involved in bodies like the *Keba* and beyond.
- 3) **Shift in Social Norms and Gender Roles:** Re-define gender roles which shall start from family. Encourage a more equal division of domestic labor and caregiving responsibilities. This can be done through public campaigns and community initiatives that challenge traditional roles and emphasize shared responsibilities between men and women.
- 4) **Changes in Inheritance Laws:** The customary laws should be improvised to ensure equal inheritance rights for women, including immovable property. This can be achieved through advocacy and policy changes that ensure women's rights to inherit property directly, not just movable assets.
- 5) **Policy and Institutional Change in Governance:** Gender Representation in *Keba*: Push for institutional reforms that ensure women's voices are heard in governance. This could mean advocating for women's inclusion in decision-making bodies, creating a gender-balanced advisory council, or establishing a quota for women in leadership roles in local government.

CONCLUSION

Gender inequality in Galo society is a deeply rooted issue that persists due to a combination of cultural, social, and systemic factors. While Galo women play essential roles in the community, fulfilling significant responsibilities in family care, agriculture, religious practices, and cultural preservation, their societal status is often subordinate due to patriarchal structures that limit their access to inheritance rights, political participation, and leadership roles. Despite these challenges, the contributions of Galo women are indispensable, and their involvement in the community remains pivotal to the tribe's identity and continuity. The unequal treatment and discrimination women face are ingrained in customary laws, social norms, and historical practices that prioritize male lineage and dominance. The preference for male children, the marginalization of women in political spheres, and the gender-biased inheritance systems are just a few examples of how gender inequality manifests. However, there is potential for change through a comprehensive approach that respects cultural traditions while promoting gender equality.

The way forward involves a multifaceted strategy, including cultural awareness and sensitization, empowerment programs for women, shifts in gender roles, changes to inheritance laws, and policy reforms in governance. By fostering education, challenging traditional gender norms, ensuring equal inheritance rights, and promoting women's active participation in decision-making bodies like the *Keba*, Galo society can create an environment that supports gender equality. These steps will not only help uplift women but also contribute to the broader goal of building a more inclusive and just society for all members, regardless of gender. Ultimately, achieving gender equality in Galo society requires the collective efforts of all, including men, women, and community leaders, to redefine the norms and systems that perpetuate inequality and work towards a future where every individual can fully realize their potential, regardless of their gender. The study, while carefully planned, has certain inherent limitations. It focuses on understanding nature of gender disparity in the society, with particular emphasis on the Galo tribe. Additionally, the study is confined to the geographical boundary of West Siang districts, Arunachal Pradesh. Therefore, the study can be considered a preliminary pursuit in regard to subject undertaken, constrained by its limited sample.

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