



# Women, Customary Law, and Political Participation: A study on Kangpokpi District, Manipur

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**Citation:** Lalpithang Lhouvum (2025), Women, Customary Law, and Political Participation: A study on Kangpokpi District, Manipur  
*Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(5) 16001-16007  
Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v30i5.11258

## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

Women's political participation in Indigenous societies is often shaped by the interaction between customary law, social institutions, and state governance structures. In the Kuki societies of Manipur, customary law has historically regulated social order, land ownership, conflict resolution, and political authority. While these systems ensured community cohesion, they also institutionalized gender hierarchies that limited women's participation in formal decision-making processes. This study examines how customary law influences women's political participation in Kuki societies and how these traditional norms interact with modern democratic institutions such as Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) under the Sixth Schedule framework.

Drawing on feminist political theory, Indigenous governance perspectives, and legal pluralism, the study analyzes women's political exclusion not merely as cultural practice but as a product of intersecting customary and state structures. Using qualitative and quantitative data collected through online surveys, interviews, and interactions with 180 respondents—including academicians, scholars, church leaders, youth leaders, college students, and social workers—the research highlights both structural constraints and emerging spaces of agency. The findings reveal that while customary law continues to restrict women's access to formal political authority, social transformation driven by education, religious institutions, and civil society has begun to challenge entrenched norms. The study contributes to debates on gender, governance, and Indigenous autonomy by emphasizing the need for culturally grounded yet gender-inclusive governance reforms.

**Keywords:** Customary Law; Kuki Societies; Women's Political Participation; Sixth Schedule; Indigenous Governance; Gender and Power.

## Introduction

The political participation of women remains a critical indicator of democratic inclusiveness and social justice. Across Indigenous societies, however, women's engagement in formal political institutions is often mediated by customary laws and traditional governance systems that predate the modern state. In Northeast India, tribal societies operate within complex frameworks of legal pluralism, where customary law coexists with constitutional governance. Among the Kuki societies of Manipur, customary law continues to play a decisive role in regulating political authority, social relations, and community decision-making, often with profound implications for women's political participation.

The Kuki societies are composed of several related tribes inhabiting the hill districts of Manipur and neighboring regions. Historically organized through village-based governance systems led by chiefs or councils of elders, Kuki political institutions were deeply embedded in kinship structures, land relations, and ritual authority (Gangte, 2015; Haokip, 2018). These institutions emphasized collective responsibility, social harmony, and customary norms, but they were also inherently patriarchal. Political authority was largely reserved for male elders, while women's roles were confined to domestic, economic, and ritual domains. As a result, women were excluded from decision-making bodies that shaped communal life.

With the incorporation of Manipur into the Indian Union and the introduction of constitutional mechanisms such as the Sixth Schedule and Autonomous District Councils (ADCs), new opportunities for political

participation emerged. However, these institutions did not dismantle customary authority; instead, they often operated alongside or were influenced by traditional power structures (Bhattacharyya, 2010). In practice, ADCs in Manipur's hill districts have remained male-dominated, reflecting the persistence of customary norms that define leadership as a masculine domain. Women's representation in these institutions remains minimal, raising critical questions about the compatibility of customary law with democratic principles of equality and inclusion.

Scholars have increasingly argued that women's political exclusion in tribal societies cannot be understood solely as a cultural issue but must be analyzed within broader political and institutional contexts (Mohanty, 2003; Shimray, 2004). Feminist political theory highlights how tradition is often selectively interpreted to legitimize male authority, while Indigenous feminist perspectives emphasize that culture itself is dynamic and capable of transformation (Smith, 2012). In Kuki societies, customary law has been preserved as a marker of identity and autonomy, yet its gendered implications remain largely unexamined in political discourse.

Religion, particularly Christianity, has played a significant role in reshaping social life among the Kuki. Missionary education and church institutions have expanded women's access to literacy, leadership roles, and public engagement (Downs, 1992). Despite these changes, political participation has not evolved at the same pace. Church leadership structures, like customary councils, continue to be dominated by men, reinforcing gender hierarchies even as women become more visible in social and educational spheres.

This study situates women's political participation within the intersection of customary law, state institutions, and socio-cultural change in Kuki societies. By examining how decisions are made, who participates in these processes, and whose voices are excluded, the research seeks to uncover the structural barriers that limit women's political agency. At the same time, it highlights emerging challenges to patriarchal norms driven by education, youth movements, and civil society engagement. Through this lens, the study contributes to broader debates on Indigenous governance, gender justice, and democratic reform in Northeast India.

### **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:**

The present study is guided by the following objectives:

- a) To examine the role of customary law in shaping women's political participation within Kuki societies of Manipur.
- b) To analyze the interaction between customary governance structures and formal political institutions such as Autonomous District Councils under the Sixth Schedule.
- c) To explore socio-cultural, religious, and institutional factors influencing women's access to political decision-making spaces.
- d) To identify emerging challenges and opportunities for enhancing women's political participation in Kuki societies.

### **RESEARCH GAP**

Despite growing scholarly interest in tribal governance and ethnic politics in Northeast India, the political participation of Indigenous women remains underexplored. Existing studies on Kuki societies have largely focused on ethnic identity, customary governance, land relations, and political mobilization, often treating women as passive social actors rather than political agents. While anthropological and historical accounts document the structure of customary institutions, they rarely interrogate the gendered nature of authority embedded within these systems.

Feminist scholarship on Northeast India has highlighted women's roles in social movements, peace-building, and economic activities, yet limited attention has been paid to how customary law specifically regulates women's participation in formal political institutions such as Autonomous District Councils. Moreover, policy-oriented studies on the Sixth Schedule emphasize administrative efficiency and ethnic autonomy but seldom address gender inclusion within these autonomous frameworks.

Another significant gap lies in the absence of empirical, community-based research that incorporates the perspectives of diverse stakeholders, including women leaders, youth, church representatives, and civil society actors. The role of Christianity in reshaping gender norms has been acknowledged, but its implications for political participation remain insufficiently examined. This study addresses these gaps by integrating feminist theory, Indigenous governance perspectives, and field-based evidence to provide a nuanced understanding of women's political participation in Kuki societies.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Scholarly literature on tribal governance in Northeast India emphasizes the centrality of customary law in regulating social and political life. Bhattacharyya (2010) argues that customary institutions among hill tribes function as parallel systems of governance, often operating beyond the effective reach of state law. In Kuki societies, traditional village councils and chieftainship structures have historically exercised authority over

land, conflict resolution, and communal decision-making (Gangte, 2015; Haokip, 2018). While these systems ensured social cohesion, they also institutionalized male dominance in political leadership.

Anthropological studies document that women in Kuki societies played vital roles in agriculture, household economy, and ritual life, yet were excluded from formal political institutions (Shimray, 2004). Ortner's (1974) feminist anthropological framework helps explain how symbolic associations between women and domestic spaces reinforce political exclusion. These insights are further developed by feminist political theorists who argue that political participation is shaped not only by formal rights but also by cultural norms and power relations (Mohanty, 2003).

Indigenous feminist scholarship challenges the assumption that tradition is inherently oppressive. Smith (2012) emphasizes that Indigenous knowledge systems are dynamic and capable of reinterpretation. Applying this perspective to Kuki societies allows for a critical reassessment of customary law as a site of both constraint and possibility. Rather than rejecting tradition outright, scholars argue for culturally grounded reforms that promote gender justice without eroding Indigenous autonomy.

The introduction of Christianity brought significant social transformation in Kuki societies. Missionary education expanded women's access to literacy and public engagement (Downs, 1992). However, church institutions often reproduced patriarchal leadership patterns, limiting women's influence in decision-making (Shimray, 2004). Studies on religion and politics in tribal areas reveal a paradox in which social empowerment does not automatically translate into political representation.

Research on the Sixth Schedule and Autonomous District Councils highlights structural weaknesses in hill area governance, including limited fiscal autonomy and bureaucratic control by state governments (Haokip, 2018). Gender remains marginal in these analyses. This study builds on existing literature by foregrounding women's political participation within the intersection of customary law, religious institutions, and state governance, thereby contributing to a more inclusive understanding of Indigenous political systems.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The historical development of Kuki societies in Manipur is deeply rooted in Indigenous systems of governance, customary law, and collective social organization. Long before the emergence of modern state institutions, Kuki communities evolved autonomous village-based political systems that regulated social relations, land ownership, conflict resolution, and leadership succession. These systems were not merely administrative mechanisms but embodied moral, spiritual, and cultural principles that sustained communal life (Gangte, 2015; Haokip, 2018).

Traditionally, Kuki villages were organized under chieftainship or council-based governance, where authority rested primarily with male leaders. Chiefs and councils of elders exercised decision-making power over matters such as land distribution, inter-village relations, warfare, and customary justice. Customary law functioned as the primary regulatory framework, transmitted orally and enforced through social consensus rather than coercive force. While this system ensured social cohesion and collective responsibility, it also institutionalized gendered hierarchies that excluded women from formal political authority (Bhattacharyya, 2010).

Women's roles in pre-colonial Kuki society were primarily situated within the domestic, economic, and ritual spheres. They played a crucial role in agricultural production, food security, and household management, contributing significantly to the subsistence economy. Women also held symbolic importance in rituals related to fertility, harvest, and communal well-being. Despite these contributions, women were largely absent from village councils and decision-making forums, as political authority was culturally constructed as a masculine domain (Shimray, 2004).

Customary law reinforced this gendered division of roles by defining leadership, inheritance, and public authority in patrilineal terms. Land ownership and political succession followed male lineage, effectively limiting women's access to resources and power. While women could exercise influence informally through kinship networks and family negotiations, such influence rarely translated into recognized political authority. This distinction between informal influence and formal power remains a defining feature of women's political marginalization in Kuki societies.

Colonial intervention in the hill areas of Manipur marked a significant shift in governance structures. British administrators adopted a policy of indirect rule, recognizing customary chiefs and councils as intermediaries while introducing new administrative boundaries and legal frameworks. Although colonial rule preserved customary authority to a large extent, it also transformed Indigenous governance by codifying certain practices and marginalizing others. This process often reinforced male-dominated leadership structures by formalizing chieftainship and council authority without addressing gender exclusion (Haokip, 2018).

The introduction of Christianity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries brought profound social and cultural change. Missionary education expanded access to literacy and schooling, including for women, leading to shifts in social roles and aspirations (Downs, 1992). Churches became important sites of community organization, moral regulation, and leadership training. Women actively participated in church activities, women's fellowships, and social service initiatives, gaining new forms of public visibility. However, church

leadership structures largely mirrored customary patriarchal norms, with decision-making authority concentrated in male clergy and elders.

Following India's independence, the integration of Manipur into the Indian Union introduced constitutional governance mechanisms aimed at protecting tribal autonomy. The Sixth Schedule and the establishment of Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) were intended to provide self-governance to hill tribes by recognizing customary practices and local decision-making. In practice, however, these institutions operated within the constraints of state control and bureaucratic oversight, limiting their effectiveness (Bhattacharyya, 2010).

For Kuki women, the introduction of ADCs did not significantly alter patterns of political exclusion. Electoral politics in the hill districts remained male-dominated, with customary norms continuing to influence candidate selection and leadership legitimacy. Women's participation was largely confined to voting rather than contesting or holding office. The persistence of customary law within formal institutions meant that patriarchal norms were reproduced rather than challenged.

The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries witnessed increased political mobilization and ethnic assertion among Kuki societies, particularly in response to inter-ethnic conflicts and demands for autonomy. Women played active roles in peace building, humanitarian response, and civil society initiatives during periods of conflict. Yet, their contributions remained largely informal and were seldom recognized within formal political structures (Shimray, 2004).

In recent decades, education, civil society engagement, and exposure to feminist and human rights discourses have begun to challenge traditional gender norms. Younger generations increasingly question the exclusion of women from decision-making bodies, including customary councils and ADCs. Women's organizations and student movements have emerged as important platforms for advocacy, although resistance from traditional authorities remains strong.

This historical trajectory demonstrates that women's political marginalization in Kuki societies is not merely a cultural legacy but the result of layered interactions between customary law, colonial governance, religious institutions, and modern state structures. Understanding this context is essential for analyzing contemporary debates on women's political participation and for envisioning pathways toward more inclusive governance that respect Indigenous autonomy while advancing gender justice.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed-methods research approach, combining quantitative and qualitative techniques to examine women's political participation within Kuki societies in Manipur. The methodological design is informed by feminist research principles and Indigenous methodologies, which emphasize relationality, contextual understanding, and ethical engagement with communities (Smith, 2012). By integrating survey data with interviews and interactive discussions, the study seeks to capture both structural patterns and lived experiences related to customary law and political participation.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

The research employs a descriptive and analytical design. Quantitative data were collected through an online survey administered using Google Forms, while qualitative data were generated through semi-structured interviews and interactive discussions. This combination allows for triangulation of data sources, enhancing the validity and depth of the analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The focus on online methods was particularly suitable given geographical dispersion, accessibility constraints, and the sensitivity of discussing gender and customary authority.

The study is based on a sample size of **180 respondents**, selected through purposive and snowball sampling techniques. The sample was designed to ensure diversity in age, gender, occupation, and social position, thereby capturing a wide range of perspectives. Respondents included academicians, independent scholars, church leaders, youth leaders, college and university students, social workers, and community activists from Kuki-inhabited areas of Manipur.

Purposive sampling was used to identify individuals with direct experience or knowledge of customary governance, political institutions, and gender relations. Snowball sampling further facilitated access to respondents who were otherwise difficult to reach, particularly women engaged in informal political or community leadership roles (Bryman, 2016).

## DATA COLLECTION METHODS

The Google-based survey consisted of both closed-ended and open-ended questions. Closed-ended questions focused on patterns of political participation, perceptions of women's leadership, awareness of customary law, and attitudes toward women's representation in Autonomous District Councils. Open-ended questions allowed



respondents to elaborate on personal experiences, community norms, and perceived barriers to women's political engagement.

## **INTERVIEWS AND INTERACTIONS**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected respondents from each category, including women leaders, customary authorities, church representatives, and youth activists. Interviews explored themes such as decision-making processes under customary law, the role of women in village governance, and the interaction between customary institutions and formal political structures. Informal interactions and discussions during community meetings, church gatherings, and academic forums provided additional contextual insights.

## **ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Ethical considerations were central to the research process. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained to protect participants, particularly when discussing sensitive issues related to power, authority, and gender norms. The research adhered to ethical standards of respect, reciprocity, and cultural sensitivity, consistent with Indigenous research ethics (Smith, 2012).

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

Quantitative data from the survey were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods to identify trends and patterns in women's political participation. Qualitative data from interviews and interactions were analyzed through thematic analysis. Recurring themes related to customary law, gender roles, institutional barriers, and emerging forms of agency were identified and interpreted. Feminist hermeneutics were employed to critically examine how tradition and authority are constructed and legitimized, while Indigenous perspectives informed culturally grounded interpretations.

## **LIMITATIONS**

The reliance on online data collection may have limited participation from individuals with restricted internet access, particularly older women in remote areas. Additionally, social desirability bias may have influenced responses on sensitive topics such as gender equality and customary authority. Despite these limitations, the combination of methods and diverse respondent categories enhances the robustness and credibility of the findings.

## **DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS**

The findings of this study reveal that women's political participation in Kuki societies is shaped by the complex interaction between customary law, socio-cultural norms, religious institutions, and formal political structures. Although constitutional mechanisms such as the Sixth Schedule and Autonomous District Councils were designed to promote self-governance in tribal areas, they have not substantially altered gendered patterns of political authority. Instead, customary norms continue to exert significant influence over decision-making processes, often reinforcing male dominance in political institutions.

Survey data indicate that while a majority of respondents acknowledge women's active roles in social, economic, and religious spheres, fewer perceive women as legitimate political leaders. This gap reflects the deeply entrenched belief that political authority is traditionally a male domain, a notion sustained through customary law and socialization practices. Similar patterns have been documented in studies of tribal governance across Northeast India, where women's leadership is often considered culturally inappropriate despite their central role in community life (Shimray, 2004; Haokip, 2018).

Customary institutions such as village councils and chieftainship structures remain critical sites of decision-making in Kuki societies. These institutions regulate land use, dispute resolution, and community discipline, yet women's participation within them is largely symbolic or informal. Interviews with respondents revealed that women often influence decisions indirectly through family networks or church groups but are excluded from formal deliberative spaces. This distinction between informal influence and formal authority underscores the limitations of customary governance in addressing gender equality (Bhattacharyya, 2010).

The interaction between customary law and formal political institutions further complicates women's political participation. Autonomous District Councils, while constitutionally mandated, often replicate customary power structures rather than challenge them. Electoral politics within ADCs remain dominated by male candidates, with women facing structural barriers such as limited access to resources, lack of political networks,

and social resistance. These findings align with feminist political theory, which argues that formal equality does not necessarily translate into substantive political inclusion (Mohanty, 2003).

Religion emerges as a paradoxical force in shaping women's political agency. Christianity has contributed to women's empowerment through education, leadership training, and organizational participation within church institutions (Downs, 1992). However, church governance structures frequently mirror patriarchal norms, limiting women's influence in decision-making roles. Respondents highlighted that while women are encouraged to lead in social service and spiritual activities, political leadership remains largely inaccessible.

Notably, the study identifies emerging challenges to traditional gender norms. Younger respondents, particularly students and youth leaders, expressed greater support for women's political participation and questioned the exclusionary aspects of customary law. Civil society organizations and women's groups have also begun advocating for greater representation within local governance structures. These developments suggest that customary law is not static but subject to reinterpretation and contestations.

Applying Indigenous feminist perspectives allows for a nuanced understanding of these dynamics. Rather than framing customary law as inherently oppressive, this approach highlights its potential for transformation when reinterpreted in inclusive ways (Smith, 2012). The findings suggest that meaningful change requires engaging with customary institutions from within, promoting gender-sensitive reforms that respect Indigenous autonomy while advancing women's political rights.

### **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

This study holds significant academic, policy, and social relevance by addressing the underexplored intersection of customary law, gender, and political participation within Kuki societies of Manipur. By foregrounding women's experiences and perspectives, the research challenges male-centric narratives that have traditionally dominated studies of tribal governance in Northeast India. It contributes to Political Science scholarship by demonstrating how legal pluralism operates in practice, where customary institutions and constitutional frameworks coexist yet reproduce gendered exclusions.

The study advances feminist political analysis by situating women's political marginalization within culturally specific contexts rather than treating it as a universal phenomenon. Through the application of Indigenous feminist perspectives, it shows that customary law is not inherently static or oppressive but is continually interpreted and enforced within existing power relations. This insight is particularly significant for understanding governance in tribal societies, where autonomy and cultural preservation are often prioritized without sufficient attention to gender justice.

From a policy perspective, the findings highlight critical gaps in the functioning of Autonomous District Councils under the Sixth Schedule. While these institutions were designed to ensure self-governance and representation for tribal communities, they have largely failed to address women's political exclusion. The study provides empirical evidence that can inform gender-sensitive reforms in hill area governance, including the incorporation of women into customary and formal decision-making bodies.

Socially, the research amplifies the voices of women who remain politically marginalized despite their active participation in community life, church organizations, and civil society. By documenting emerging shifts in attitudes among youth and educated sections of society, the study underscores the potential for change driven from within Indigenous communities. Ultimately, this research contributes to broader debates on democracy, inclusion, and Indigenous self-governance by advocating for governance models that balance cultural autonomy with gender equality.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the findings of the study, several recommendations are proposed to enhance women's political participation in Kuki societies. First, customary institutions should initiate internal reforms that allow women's inclusion in village councils and decision-making bodies. Such reforms must be community-driven to ensure cultural legitimacy and sustainability.

Second, Autonomous District Councils should adopt gender-sensitive policies, including reserved seats or quotas for women, to promote substantive representation. Capacity-building programs aimed at training women in leadership, governance, and political processes can further strengthen participation.

Third, church institutions and civil society organizations should actively support women's political empowerment by extending leadership training beyond social and spiritual domains into governance and policy advocacy. Given the church's influence in Kuki societies, its role in reshaping gender norms is crucial.

Fourth, educational institutions and youth organizations should promote gender equality through civic education and awareness programs that challenge patriarchal interpretations of tradition. Encouraging dialogue between customary leaders, women's groups, and policymakers can foster mutual understanding and collaborative reform.

Finally, future policy interventions must recognize the coexistence of customary and constitutional systems and adopt an integrated approach that respects Indigenous autonomy while advancing gender justice.

## CONCLUSION

This study has examined women's political participation in Kuki societies through the intersecting lenses of customary law, Indigenous governance, and formal political institutions. The findings reveal that despite constitutional provisions aimed at promoting self-governance, women remain largely excluded from formal political authority due to the persistence of patriarchal norms embedded within customary law and institutional practices. Women's political marginalization is not merely a cultural residue but a product of historical, religious, and administrative processes that continue to shape governance in Manipur's hill districts. At the same time, the study demonstrates that Kuki society is undergoing gradual transformation. Increased access to education, active engagement in church and civil society organizations, and changing attitudes among younger generations indicate emerging opportunities for women's political empowerment. These developments suggest that customary law is not immutable but can be reinterpreted in ways that support inclusion without undermining Indigenous identity.

By integrating feminist theory with Indigenous perspectives, this research contributes to the decolonization of knowledge production in Northeast India studies. It challenges dominant narratives that either romanticize tradition or impose external models of gender equality without cultural sensitivity. Instead, the study advocates for a balanced approach that engages customary institutions as sites of reform rather than obstacles to progress.

Ultimately, achieving meaningful political participation for women in Kuki societies requires structural change, community dialogue, and institutional commitment. Recognizing women as legitimate political actors is essential not only for gender justice but also for strengthening democratic governance and social cohesion in Indigenous societies. This study thus provides a foundation for future research and policy initiatives aimed at building inclusive, culturally grounded governance frameworks in Manipur and beyond.

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