

Women as Entrepreneurs: A Case Study of Ema Keithel (Woman Market) of Manipur, India

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Abstract

This paper reviews the Ema Keithel market of Manipur, India, which is a 500-year-old Asia's largest all-women market. More specifically, this paper aims to identify the societal and economic impacts of this market and to ascertain the motivations of the formation of this market. All the shops inside this market are owned by females. From the procurement of raw materials to the production of finished products, everything in this market is done by women. Ema Keithel serves as the workplace for more than 5000 women. This market has been one of the major forces behind empowering Manipuri women and making them financially independent beings who can create an evolved and equitable society. A random survey comprising 110 sample points was conducted. The result shows that Ema Keithel serves as the sole place of earning for 88 % of these women entrepreneurs. 33 % of these women are the sole bread earners for their families. It was also observed that the majority of these women make a profit margin of Rs.1000-Rs.2000 per day. Apart from empowering the women of Manipur financially, this market has served as a place of immense social importance. 100 percent of the women confirmed their active participation in matters of social importance like drug abuse, violence against women etc. The purpose of this study is to represent the creativity, progressive thinking, innovation and the strong will of women to drive their livelihood from the frontlines. Contrary to the prevalent conditions in most of the places where men are the frontrunner when it comes to entrepreneurship, in the Manipuri society, women are the main driving force, and it has been proved through the test of time that they are doing justice to the responsibility entrusted upon them in every possible way and contributing towards the development of the nation.

Keywords- Asia's largest all women market, Entrepreneurship, Nation building

INTRODUCTION

In any society, human resource development plays an important role in building the nation. Investing wisely in the development of this important resource brings in a lot of scope for the enrichment

and paves the path of the future of a nation. However, investing in human resource development doesn't mean prioritizing one gender over the other. Half of the entire nation's population comprises of females, and no country

can move towards success unless both the gender gets equal opportunity to thrive and prosper. Thus, the development of women is indispensable in the development of the nation.

Between the years 1994 to 2012, an estimated population of 133 million people rose out of poverty in India, which indeed is commendable. However, only a mere 27% of the adult Indian women population had a job or were actively searching for a job in the year 2012. This is remarkably contrasting to the 79% of the Indian adult male populations who were working or were searching for a job actively. (Annette Dixon)

Safety being a concern, the participation of rural women in working in urban areas has not increased much, even with the rapid decrease in rural jobs. A whopping 20 million women had to drop out of the workforce between the years 2005 to 2012. India ranks 120 in terms of the participation of women in the workforce and remains extremely well placed in terms of gender-based violence. The growth of our country could be boosted by 1.5 % to 9% if even 50% of our women population could be included in our workforce. (Annette Dixon)

The development of women in India is considered as a part of nation development, and an immense number of policies, laws and programs are being designed as a part of this process. From the first five-year plan to the fifth five-year plan, the policies formed were more to help women in playing their domestic role more efficiently. However, from the second plan onwards to the sixth plan welfare of women took a more prominent place under the category of social welfare. Seema (2013), in her work, has gone through and discussed all the plans and policies of

the Indian Government to bring about the welfare of women and, eventually, the society as a whole.

The trend of entrepreneurship among Indian women has increased by leaps and bounds in the last 30 years; however, it is a relatively new trend and still requires a lot of planning and policy-making on the part of the government and the local bodies. According to Yadav (2016), even though a lot of theoretical and research papers have been published on women entrepreneurship in the 12 established entrepreneurship journals from 1990 to 2016, we still have a long path to cover in terms of a theoretical database of research on women entrepreneurship. It was also suggested that the lens of feminist theories could be applied in the field of the already existing entrepreneurship theories to further enhance the progress. A suggestion was also made to take these studies beyond the national boundaries of economically developed places.

The states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram, more famously known as the seven sisters along with the brother state of Sikkim, comprises the North East of India. The north-eastern region of India shares borders with Tibet, Bhutan, Nepal, Bangladesh and Myanmar on all sides except a narrow corridor that connects the region with other parts of India. This region of India is endowed with immense natural resources like oil, gas, minerals, gemstones etc. This region is one of the hotspots for biodiversity and has the world's only floating national park in Keibul Lamjao, which is situated on the largest phumdi of Loktak Lake.

In spite of being immensely rich in natural resources, North East India lags behind most of the

states in terms of economic development. North East India contributes a little over 2.5% of India's GDP (North East Advisory Regional Council). It is mostly an agrarian economy, with over 70% of the population involved in agriculture.

The Indian government has been actively introducing policies and laws to bring about the economic development of the north-eastern parts of India. To encourage industrial investments and the growth of entrepreneurship in this region, the Indian government introduced the North East Investment Promotion Policy in 1997 wherein, the investors in this region were provided with a number of incentives. In 2007, North East Industrial and Investment Promotion Policy (NEIIPP) was introduced, which is a reformed and advanced edition of the already existing policies and introduced further incentives for the investors (North East Advisory Regional Council).

Chingtham (2014) did a thorough analysis of one of the most important economic centers of development and trade of Manipur, i.e., the Ema Keithel market of Manipur. A thorough, comprehensive analysis of the economic and social impacts of this market was also performed. The daily income and the difference in the incomes of the educated and the uneducated vendors were also performed. This study revealed the problems of the women of these markets and suggested ways to overcome those shortcomings and hurdles.

Role of Women in Manipuri Society

Manipur is located in the north-eastern part of India amidst lush green mountains and rugged terrains. Imphal is the capital city of Manipur and is covered on all sides by mountains. Being located on an extreme border and because of its high altitude and other physiographic difficulties,

life in Manipur is not as comfortable as it might be on the plains of mainland India.

Women of Manipur have always played a very crucial and active role in societal and economic development. In spite of being a patriarchal society, these women have proved their mettle in providing for and protecting their families and the community as well.

Women play an intricate role in politics, research, sports and entrepreneurship. Women groups like "Meira Paibi" play the most imperative and active role against drug abuse, alcohol and also raises their voice against corrupt political policies, which brings instability to the Manipuri society.

"Ema" means mother, "kei" means storage and "thel" means sell. Ema Keithel is thus market run by the "Emas" or the mothers. Everything right from clothes, utensils, livestock, fruits, handicrafts to all the basic necessities is procured, manufactured and sold by women. This market not only acts as the most important center of trade and business, but it also acts as the meeting ground where women assemble to discuss various matters of state and politics.

Historical Background

The exact date of origin of this marketplace remains unknown; however, it is believed from the available evidence that this market dates back to the 16th century. The formation of this female-only market was due to the policy of "Lallup-Kaba," i.e., a forced labour policy introduced by the king of Manipur, which forced all the males to cultivate distant lands and fight wars. While the females used to stay back in their villages and cultivate small paddy fields and produce the required food and money by selling the harvested

crops in makeshift markets. This led to the formation of a lot of female-driven markets, the largest one being “Ema Keithel” market of Imphal. Being a hotspot of natural diversity, a lot of exotic fruits, vegetables and crops grow in Manipur. One such really important crop is the “black rice,” which grows extensively throughout Manipur. During the British colonial rule, most of the crops and vegetables are grown here were exported to England, leaving the local demand for crops to go unfulfilled. This resulted in protests which were led by the “Emas” of Manipur. In order to perish the movement, British authorities decided to sell off the “Ema Market” to foreign investors. However, the women of “Ema Market” protected their beloved market with all their might.

Post-independence, this market emerged as a centre of exchange of socio-political ideas. With the passage of time, it became more prosperous and emerged as the most important market of Manipur, which has a major impact on the state economy.

Sellers of Ema Keithel

Only married women are allowed to own a shop in the Ema Market. Also, there is an age restriction that prevents young girls from working as helpers and labors in the market, thus preventing them from being used as child-labors. This restriction of age bar encourages women to complete their education and gives them the opportunity to thrive in life.

Women come from all corners of Manipur to sell their products in the “Ema Keithel”. Thus, this market acts as a center of the conflux of culture, language and ideas among the various tribes residing in Manipur. Handlooms, Bamboo handicrafts, dry fish, all varieties of flowers, fruits

and vegetables, the famous king chili or “U-morok” are a few of the wide range of products which is sold in this market.

Financial Aid for Ema Keithel

For any business to run and prosper, the most important requirement is capital. Thus, the “Emas” of this market has formed a governing union that is responsible for managing the market. The average annual profit of each woman stands somewhere between Rs.75, 000 to Rs.250, 000. The annual turnover of “Ema Keithel” stands somewhere between 50-60 crore rupees.

Also, they support other female entrepreneurs by loaning them money from a credit-based scheme of this governing union. They encourage the formation of more and more self-help groups and local businesses. All this results in the formation of a more independent and strong-willed women population who are ready to take on the challenges of tomorrow and lead our nation towards a better future.

Standing the Test of Time

On 4th January 2006 earthquake shook Imphal and its neighboring areas and destroyed almost half of the “Ema Market.” This served a severe blow to the Manipuri economy. However, the iron-willed women of Manipur strived to rebuild their “Ema Keithel,” and finally, with the help of the Indian Government, the reconstruction of this market was complete.

OBJECTIVES

- The objective of this study is to assess.
- The role of women in socio-economic matters of the state.
- The importance of “Ema Market” in the Manipuri society.

- The stability of a society is built on this model.
- The role of women as self-sufficient and financially independent entrepreneurs.
- The societal and economic impact and to incorporate the benefitting ideas into our society.

METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out by performing a survey on a random sample of 110 women who hail from all parts of Manipur. This survey included Meiteis, Nagas and Kukis from the districts of Imphal, Thoubal, Tamenglong, Chandel etc.

Fig. 1 represents the relation of age group and marital status of women of Ema market.

The data collected from the survey clearly shows that around 7.27% of women entrepreneurs are in the age group of 30 to 39. Whereas that of age

group 40-49, 50-59, 60-69 and above 70 is 12.72%, 24.54%, 28.18 percent and 27.27% respectively. This is a clear indication that the age restriction imposed by the governing body of “Ema Keithal” is followed strictly. Most of the women entrepreneurs here understand the importance of modern education and its importance in order to become self-dependent. Thus, they encourage the youth of Manipur towards education and actively take part in decisions of the state, which concerns the education of Manipuri people.

Fig. 2 clearly depicts that the woman employed in the Ema market mostly earn their sole bread from this place. Only around 12% of the women are involved in some other activities while a whopping percentage of 88% of women does this as their full-time job.

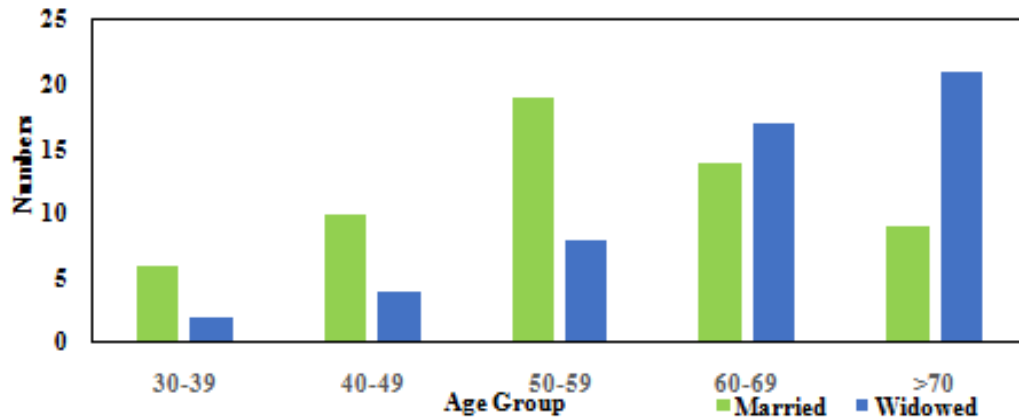


Fig 1: Number of Women in Ema Market in Relation to Age-Group

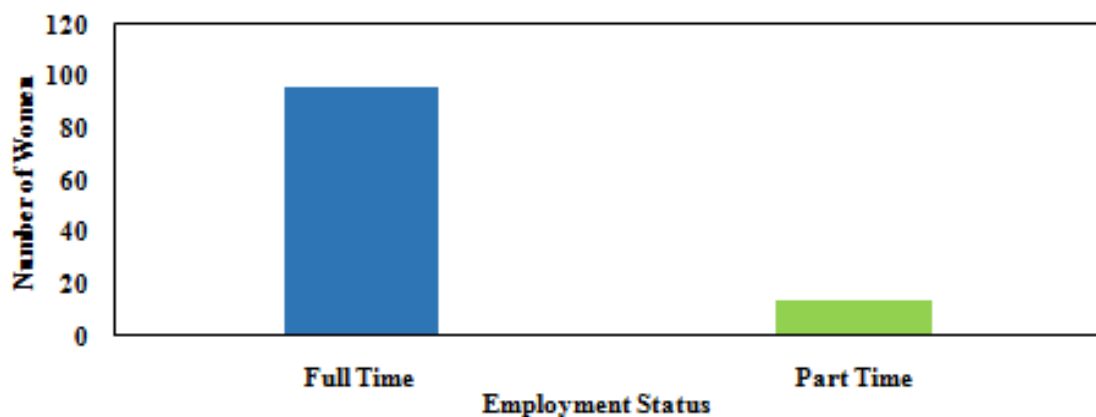


Fig 2: Full Time/Part Time Job

The survey also presented us with the fact that around 33% of these women are the sole earners in their family.

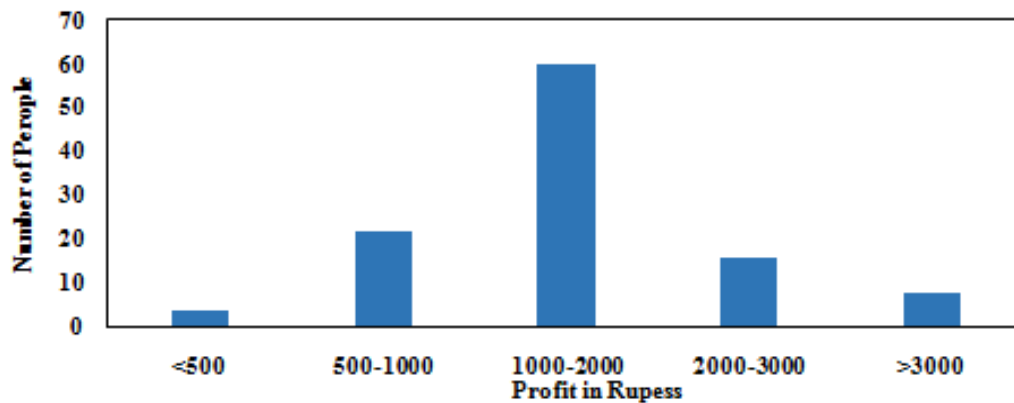


Fig 3: Profit Margin per Person

Fig. 3 provides us with the per day profit margin of the Ema market's women entrepreneurs. Around 54% of the people who took this survey earn around 1000 to 2000 rupees per day, and only around 3 percent is known to earn less than 500 rupees per day. Around 48% of these women consider themselves self-sufficient. 100 % of these women are a member of all women local groups like "Moirai Paibi" etc., which regularly takes care of matters that concern the society and the state. 96 % of these women reported having taken part in more than one hunger strike, protests against drug and alcohol abuse of the local youths.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Women of all age groups came together to form an all-women market in the heart of Imphal city. Since time immemorial, this place has been serving as a place of great economic and social importance. Women rent their shops in this market and earn their livelihood by selling goods. A part of their income goes as taxes to the government, which helps in nation-building and growth of the state economy.

Ema market serves as the center for cultural and ideological exchanges among women of different backgrounds, ethnicity and religion.

Their involvement in political matters of the state during protests against ASFA or against drug abuse in Manipur showcases their strong will and determination to maintain a stable, prosperous and self-sustaining society and secures our nation's future.

The story of "Ema Market" is that of Matriarchal dominance, which is, in fact, quite difficult to find even today in most places. The women of Manipur enjoy financial independence and thus lead by example. This encourages their future generation and gives them hope, strength and will to excel in all other fields as well.

Manipur being a mountainous region is still lagging behind compared to other places of India when it comes to infrastructure and development, but there is a lot that all of us could learn from the Manipuri society and incorporate it to build a nation where both the gender gets to contribute equally towards the development of this nation. Such a model of societal development can be adopted in the rest of the parts of India to empower our women and build a nation by incorporating both genders equally in our workforces.

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