



INTERFACE OF CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHTS AND CUSTOMARY LAWS: AN INSIGHT INTO THE AO WOMEN LIVED EXPERIENCES OF POLITICAL REPRESENTATION IN NAGALAND

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Abstract: This paper attempts to study the interface between constitutional rights of India with customary laws of Nagaland. Given the long respected and community driven aspects of Customary laws, its practices in various indigenous societies have seen to reproduce gender biases. Customary laws are not always conducive to modern development especially with regards to gender rights. Under customary laws, the distribution of power, status and resources have known to be male centered. The reservation for women in the urban local bodies in Nagaland is a contentious rights-centric issue in Northeast India. Under the leadership of the Naga Mothers Association (NMA), the women in Nagaland have carried forward one of the most devoted and prolonged struggles to fight for the implementation of women's reservation in the urban local bodies. Different stakeholders invoke article 371A, an in depth and detailed elaboration of the provision of reservation for women and it is highlighted that the provision of reservation does not violate the special autonomy for the Nagas given in the form of Article 371A of the Indian Constitution.

Based on ethnographic research, the study envisages analyzing the contentions between Article 243T and Article 371A of the Constitution. The Article 243T reserves 1/3rd of seats for women belonging to SC and ST in local bodies, ensuring gender representation in governance. While Article 371A grants Nagaland autonomy over religious and social practices, customary law, and land ownership, allowing the state to govern its own affairs without interference from the central government. Further, the paper attempts to address the Ao Naga customary law practices from a gender perspective and examine its implication on women rights, and impeding gender issues by offering feminist perspective of constructivist approach to culture as a means of alternative solution in the face of negotiations between gender rights and the existing customary laws of the land.

Key words: *Constitutional Rights, Customary Laws, Ao Women and Political Representation.*



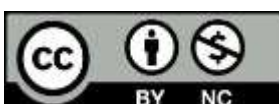
Introduction

This paper attempts to highlight the complex interface between constitutional guarantees and customary laws in shaping the political representation of Ao Naga women in Nagaland. It situates this inquiry within the broader context of India's plural legal system, where universal principles of equality coexist and often contend with culturally embedded norms. Nowhere is this tension more visible than in Nagaland, where indigenous institutions of governance continue to exercise substantial authority alongside the constitutional framework of the Indian state. The Constitution of India enshrines fundamental rights to equality and non-discrimination while also recognizing the distinctive socio-cultural identities of tribal communities. This dual commitment has produced a layered legal and political landscape in which the protection of cultural autonomy sometimes aligns with, and at other times conflicts with, the pursuit of gender justice.

In Nagaland, this tension is particularly pronounced because customary laws are not merely symbolic traditions but continue to function as living systems of governance that regulate social relations, resource distribution, and political decision-making. Customary laws among the Ao Nagas are deeply embedded in everyday life and are sustained through oral traditions and institutional practices such as village councils and tribal bodies. Their authority rests on collective acceptance and their perceived role in preserving identity and cultural continuity. However, these systems have increasingly been critiqued for their gendered structures. While women contribute significantly to the economic, social, and cultural life of the community, their access to formal political authority remains limited. Leadership roles are often culturally associated with masculinity, resulting in systemic exclusions from decision-making spaces.

In contrast, the Indian constitutional framework advances a normative vision of substantive equality, including affirmative measures aimed at correcting historical disadvantages. The provision for reservations for women in local governance is one such mechanism intended to enhance inclusive participation. Yet, in Nagaland, the implementation of women's reservation in urban local bodies has generated significant contestation. Opponents often argue that such provisions are incompatible with customary laws and threaten the autonomy of indigenous institutions, while proponents view them as essential for advancing gender justice and democratic inclusion. This debate is further complicated by Nagaland's special constitutional status, which grants the state significant autonomy over matters relating to customary law and local governance. While this autonomy has been crucial in safeguarding indigenous identity and self-governance, it has also created space for customary norms to supersede or resist certain constitutional interventions. The resulting friction is especially evident in disputes surrounding women's political reservation, where questions of identity, autonomy, and equality intersect in complex ways. Despite these constraints, women's movements in Nagaland have played a crucial role in challenging exclusionary practices and advocating for greater political inclusion. Organizations such as the Naga Mothers Association have emerged as influential actors, mobilizing support across communities and engaging with both traditional and state institutions. Their activism reflects a broader reconfiguration of gender discourse within Naga society, highlighting women's agency in negotiating social and political change.

This study adopts an ethnographic approach to examine the lived experiences of Ao Naga women as they navigate the intersecting frameworks of constitutional law and customary governance. Through qualitative methods, including interviews and participant observation, it explores how women interpret, negotiate, and





respond to structural constraints in their everyday lives. By focusing on lived realities rather than abstract legal debates, the study provides a grounded understanding of how rights and customs are experienced at the community level. Central to this analysis is the contention that framing constitutional provisions and customary laws as mutually exclusive is overly reductive. Instead, these frameworks are better understood as dynamic and evolving systems capable of reinterpretation. A feminist and constructivist lens further reveals that cultural practices are neither fixed nor uniform but are continuously reshaped through social interaction and historical change. This perspective opens analytical space for imagining more inclusive forms of governance that reconcile cultural continuity with gender equality.

Ultimately, the experiences of Ao Naga women demonstrate both the persistence of structural constraints and the gradual emergence of transformative possibilities. Expanding educational access, increasing political awareness, and sustained advocacy have contributed to incremental shifts in attitudes and practices. By foregrounding these experiences, the paper highlights the evolving relationship between gender, tradition, and constitutional law, offering insights into the contested but ongoing negotiation of women's political representation in Nagaland.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the interface between constitutional provisions on gender equality and political representation and the customary laws governing the Ao Naga community in Nagaland.
2. To analyze the lived experiences of Ao Naga women in accessing political representation, focusing on how customary practices influence their participation and rights.

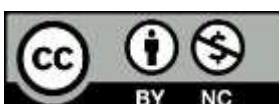
Research Methodology

The Study employed the qualitative method within the broad framework of women participation in politics in local governance with special emphasis on Ao women of Nagaland. The data and information has been collected from both primary and secondary sources. The focus of the primary source data collected from the Mokokchung Municipal Council under Mokokchung district of Nagaland which is an Ao inhabited area. The research adopts a purposive and snowball sampling methods. Purposive sampling involves deliberately selecting participants who possess specific characteristics relevant to research objectives. Snowball sampling complements this by relying on referrals from initial participants to identify the additional suitable respondents. The study also adopted semi-structured interviews through negotiated interactive observation, and the interviews conducted with different Ao community members. The collected data including field notes and interview transcripts are subject to the respondents lived experiences resulted into in thematic analysis and case studies.

Review of literature

This study is an attempt to get first hand information on the recently conducted Urban Local Body (ULB) elections (2024) in Mokokchung Town, Nagaland. There is no literature available on the representation of women in the Urban local bodies in Nagaland, except journalistic writings. However, literature on other communities has been incorporated for the same.

Amrita Basu (2005) mentioned that men dominate most of the political parties and they ignored the issues related to women. She argued that women played an important role in the social movements and has important position of state but in political parties they have less representation, especially at the top. She





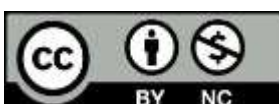
mentioned that under representation of women in politics shows that there are prejudices, which work against women and favour men's role on politics. Matthews (2019), while studying about the politics, representation and party system of US has mentioned in his paper that gender and politics explains the gender inequality in politics from 1970s. He has argued that intersectionality explains the interplay between the structure and inequality in the representation of political structure. He talked about how every institution in society is gendered.

Ramakrishnan (2021) has discussed about women participation in politics in India. Economic Forum Global Gender Gap report of 2021 shows India ranked 140th out of 150 countries. This report shows India as third worst performer in South Asia. She argued that declining in rank is related to the decline in the political empowerment of women. Women ministers are 9.1% in 2021 in comparison to 23.1% in 2019. She has mentioned that not only traditional hurdles but infrastructural barriers also discourage women to participate in politics. Increasing reservation of women in politics not necessarily solves the problems of women in general but it will definitely lead to discussion about women's issue. Men play the role of "gatekeeper" in political parties, and selection of candidates in political parties is highly dominated by men that exclude women from participating in political system.

Saikia (2024) in her blog Women and Women's Quota in Urban Local Bodies in Nagaland: A Saga of Struggle and Success highlighted the 2024 Urban Local Body (ULB) elections in Nagaland, held after two decades, marked a major shift in women's political participation, with women winning 102 of 278 seats. This follows the election of two women to the Nagaland Legislative Assembly in 2023, indicating gradual progress in representation. She emphasized the ULBs are governed by the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act, which mandates one-third reservation for women. However, its implementation in Nagaland was delayed due to opposition citing Article 371A, which protects customary laws. These laws, rooted in patriarchy, limit women's rights in inheritance and public decision-making. According to her, the movement was spearheaded by the Naga Mothers' Association (NMA), founded in 1984. Through sustained advocacy and legal action involving the Guwahati High Court and Supreme Court of India, women's groups pushed for implementation despite protests in Dimapur. Support from the People's Union for Civil Liberties remained crucial. Finally she gave her remarks on the 2023 Municipal Bill enabled 33% reservation, leading to the 2024 elections. These developments signify a gradual transformation toward gender inclusion and participatory governance in Nagaland.

Nagaland Tribune editorial column (2023), on Naga women support Nagaland Municipal Act 2001, says Naga Mothers Association; takes note of the silence of 2 women MLAs highlights that Naga women have expressed strong support for the Nagaland Municipal Act, 2001, and its provision of 33% reservation for women in urban local bodies. The Naga Mothers Association (NMA), in this article had opposed the decision to repeal the Act, criticizing the lack of consultation and civil dialogue with women before taking such a step. The association also noted the silence of the two women MLAs in the Assembly, describing it as concerning given the significance of the issue.

In Northeast News and Review (2025) an article mentioned of how Dzuwichu, advisor to the Naga Mothers' Association, received a death threat for her advocacy of women's rights among Nagas, particularly in Nagaland. Despite this, she remains resolute. She stated that she has faced numerous threats over the years while fighting for long-delayed municipal elections and women's reservation. With elections now held, over a hundred women serve in urban local bodies through constitutional rights and a Supreme Court ruling.





She emphasized that women's rights are human rights and affirmed that violence will not silence Naga women from asserting their rights.

Morung Express News Dimapur (2010) in an article titled 'Art 371 (A) was provided to protect Nagas not to suppress Naga women' explains how Article 371(A) was intended to protect Naga identity, not to suppress Naga women. Although Nagas often describe their society as egalitarian, resistance to 33% reservation for women in municipal and town elections contradicts this claim. Jakhalu emphasized that women's reservation must be viewed holistically. She noted that arguments claiming it opposes Naga culture or lacks capable women reveal a contradiction in the belief that women already enjoy equal status. She argued that such inclusion should have evolved naturally and is essential to address power imbalances in decision-making.

Jakhalu highlighted that electoral politics itself is not traditionally Naga, yet communities have adapted to modern systems. Questioning the resistance, she asserted that Article 371(A) should not be misused to hinder progress or create division between men and women. Historically, while women contributed to survival decisions, customs limited their formal roles, restricting their experience. She concluded that equitable representation is vital for justice and development, stating that no society can claim progress while discriminating against women.

Tianenla Jathy (2020) in her article 'The Role and Position of women in Traditional Ao Society' examined women's status in Ao Naga society of Nagaland during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, focusing on how gender roles were shaped by customary laws and social institutions. It argues that despite claims of egalitarianism, Ao society was strongly patriarchal, with men dominating political and economic life while women were largely confined to domestic roles. The Aos of Mokokchung were organized around village governance, where the village functioned as the main political unit under the all-male Putu Menden (village council). Women were excluded from decision-making, showing clear structural inequality.

Gender roles were shaped through the morung system. Boys trained in the ariju received military and leadership education, reinforcing masculine ideals of bravery and authority. Girls were educated in the tsuki, learning domestic skills, weaving, and etiquette. The ariju held greater importance, reflecting male dominance. Marriage was monogamous and consent-based, but divorce and inheritance laws were unequal, with patrilineal inheritance limiting women's property rights and reinforcing dependence. Despite this, women contributed significantly to agriculture, household work, and cultural life, though they had little political participation. Colonial and missionary influence introduced education and employment opportunities for women, but customary inheritance systems remained largely unchanged. Overall, Ao society remained patriarchal despite lacking rigid class divisions.

Chüzho, N (2025) emphasized in her article 'Customary Law and Customary Practice: Changkija's Criticism of the 'Customary' in Relation to Gendered Experiences' examines how Monalisa Changkija critiques the idea of the "customary" in Naga society, showing that it operates both as law (used in courts) and as everyday practice rooted in tradition. These customary systems shape social and political life but are largely male-centered, limiting women's roles in decision-making and public participation. Using a feminist perspective, the article argues that these practices systematically disadvantage women, creating what Changkija calls "customary victimization." It highlights how the political and personal are intertwined, as



women experience discrimination not only structurally but also in their daily lives. Overall, the piece shows that customary law and practice reinforce gender inequality while shaping women's lived experiences.

Nukshirenla & Dhanaraju (2021) examines the status of Ao Naga women by engaging with recent debates on gender roles in Nagaland. It highlights contrasting views about women's position in tribal societies. Some regard them as respected and valued, while others argue they remain subordinate within a patriarchal framework. In Ao Naga society, which follows patrilineal and patriarchal systems, social norms and institutions are shaped by beliefs in male dominance and female inferiority. Although women are often described as equal partners to men, this equality is largely symbolic and not reflected in actual practices. Women's roles remain restricted, and they are excluded from key areas of power and decision-making. It further discusses how customary laws protected under Article 371(A) of the Indian Constitution govern social, economic, and political life. These laws both preserve tradition and reinforce gender inequalities, making gender a contested issue. The paper concluded that true societal balance requires recognizing both men and women as equal contributors and critically examining customary practices. It stresses that reforming tradition and customary law is essential for achieving gender equality in Naga society.

Benchilo & Chavhan (2025) analyzes the coexistence of Naga customary law and the Indian legal system in Nagaland through the framework of legal pluralism, which refers to the operation of multiple legal systems within a single socio-political context. Nagaland presents a unique case where indigenous customary practices function alongside formal state law, creating both harmony and tension. The study examines three key aspects: the foundations of both systems, their approaches to justice, and the conflicts and scope for harmonization. Naga customary law is rooted in tradition, culture, and community practices, and is largely unwritten and orally transmitted, differing across tribes. It governs dispute resolution, social conduct, and local governance through village councils that emphasize collective responsibility and social harmony. In contrast, the Indian legal system is formal, codified, and based on constitutional principles, with procedural rigor and an adversarial approach. Article 371A grants Nagaland autonomy by restricting the application of parliamentary laws on customary matters without state approval, enabling both systems to coexist. A key distinction lies in their approach to justice: customary law follows a restorative model focused on reconciliation, compensation, and community harmony, while the Indian system emphasizes punitive justice, deterrence, due process, and uniformity. This difference is evident in handling serious offences, where customary law often imposes compensation, whereas Indian law prescribes imprisonment. However, this dual system leads to conflicts such as lack of uniformity in customary law, tensions with fundamental rights like gender equality, limited capacity to address serious crimes, and jurisdictional ambiguity. Despite these challenges, legal pluralism has advantages, including preservation of cultural identity, accessibility of justice in remote areas, community participation, and quick dispute resolution. The article advocates harmonization rather than replacement through codification of customary laws, alignment with constitutional values, institutional dialogue, and clear jurisdictional boundaries. It concludes that while the coexistence of both systems is complex, a balanced and integrative approach can ensure justice while preserving Nagaland's legal and cultural heritage.

According to WSC (Women's Studies Centre) report 2007-2017 'Status of Naga Women with reference to customary laws in Nagaland (2010) report on the status of Naga women analyzes how customary laws influence gender relations in Nagaland, especially in marriage, divorce, property rights, child custody, and crimes against women. It finds that traditional practices are largely patriarchal and patrilineal, placing





women in subordinate roles with limited inheritance rights, restricted decision-making power, and difficulties in accessing justice in cases of sexual abuse. At the same time, Naga society is undergoing change, with modern ideas of gender equality emerging alongside traditional norms. This creates tension between preserving cultural identity and advancing women's rights. The report also notes the lack of adequate documentation on these issues, which limits effective policy development. It aims to record discriminatory practices and promote dialogue within communities to find culturally sensitive approaches to gender equity, ultimately supporting the creation of legal and social frameworks that empower women while respecting tradition.

Aphun, K. (2024) in Customary Law and Constitutional Provisions: Conflicts and Contradictions examined the tension between India's constitutional framework and the persistence of customary laws in regions like Northeast India. While the Constitution upholds equality, justice, and fundamental rights, customary laws continue to regulate social life in indigenous communities. Aphun argues that this coexistence often creates legal conflicts when customary practices clash with constitutional guarantees of gender equality, individual rights, and non-discrimination. The study highlights the complexities of legal pluralism, where state and customary laws operate simultaneously but unevenly. Courts face challenges in balancing respect for tradition with constitutional morality. Key areas of conflict include marriage, inheritance, and property rights. Aphun concludes that customary law should be preserved but aligned with constitutional principles to ensure justice, especially for women.

Barman, R. (2023) in Women's Movement for Reservation in the Urban Local Bodies in Nagaland: An Analytical Review', examined the prolonged struggle for women's political reservation in Nagaland's Urban Local Bodies. The study situates this movement within gender justice, indigenous rights, and constitutional governance in India. It highlights the role of Naga women's organisations, especially the Naga Mothers' Association, in demanding 33% reservation for women under the 74th Constitutional Amendment. Despite constitutional provisions for gender equality, implementation in Nagaland has faced resistance due to Article 371(A) and the protection of customary laws. Barman also discusses the tension between traditional Naga socio-political systems and democratic representation, noting women's exclusion from decision-making. The movement is framed as indigenous feminism balancing cultural identity with political inclusion and equality.

Lived experiences of Ao women in relation to political participation in Mokokchung Town

Case Study One: Miss Walunila, a 33-year-old graduate from Penli Ward in Mokokchung Town, represents a new generation of women leaders in local governance who have entered public life through community engagement and grassroots participation. An unmarried Christian belonging to a family with an annual income of around ₹8–9 lakhs, she currently serves as a Councilor in the Mokokchung Municipal Council (MMC), where she is responsible for urban forestry, environmental conservation, tree plantation, and tourism development. She contested the recent Urban Local Body election as a candidate of the Nationalist Democratic Progressive Party (NDPP) and was successfully elected from her ward. Despite not having a political family background, she built her public identity through active involvement in church activities, youth initiatives, and community welfare programs. Her political journey, however, was not without challenges, including competition from a more experienced candidate within her party, criticism and rumours from political circles, and questions regarding her dual role in church and politics. Initially hesitant due to financial constraints, lack of political experience, and limited family support, she twice





declined to contest while serving as general secretary of her church. Her entry into politics was ultimately shaped by strong encouragement from local youth, who also promoted ethical campaigning by discouraging alcohol, gambling, and disruptive election practices. She acknowledges that mentorship from a former ward candidate and the trust of the electorate was crucial to her success, which ultimately led to an uncontested victory after her opponent withdrew. As a councilor, she prioritizes youth empowerment, sanitation, waste management, and broader urban development initiatives. She observes that women were historically excluded from decision-making but notes that the 33 percent reservation has significantly improved women's participation and confidence in governance. She follows a participatory governance model through consultation with a five-member ward committee. While she supports women's capability to participate in traditional institutions such as Putu Menden, she recognizes that cultural norms may continue to favour male leadership, without undermining women's leadership potential.

Case Study Two: Miss. Maongtula, a 44-year-old resident of Alempang Ward in Mokokchung Town, represents the growing presence of women in local governance and political life. Originally from Sungratsü village, she is a qualified advocate with B.A. and LL.B. degrees and identifies as a Christian. With an annual income of approximately ₹2.4 lakh, she currently serves as a councilor in the Mokokchung Municipal Council (MMC). In the recent Urban Local Body (ULB) election, she contested as a candidate of the Nationalist Democratic Progressive Party (NDPP) and was elected unopposed, reflecting strong community trust in her leadership. Unlike many political figures, she does not come from a political family; instead, her entry into politics was driven by personal interest, a commitment to public service, and a desire to strengthen women's representation in governance. She acknowledges that Naga society has historically been patriarchal, with women largely excluded from decision-making roles, although she notes gradual change as women become more visible and empowered. She firmly believes in gender equality, stating that men and women should have equal opportunities in both social and political spheres. She strongly supports the 33 percent reservation for women in Urban Local Bodies under the 74th Constitutional Amendment, describing it as a transformative step that has enabled greater participation and confidence among women in governance. In her role as councillor, she maintains independence in administrative matters, while also valuing collective discussion and consultation with fellow MMC members before decisions are finalized. Despite progress, she observes that women's voices in political meetings are still often overshadowed by male dominance. She also advocates for the inclusion of women in traditional institutions such as Putu Menden, arguing that this would strengthen democratic values and ensure balanced representation. Although not affiliated with the Naga Mothers Association, she highlights the significant role of the church in shaping electoral participation, noting that its guidance, encouragement, and prayers were instrumental in her uncontested election.

Case Study Three: Mrs. Imoinla Aier, an 88-year-old widow residing in Mokokchung Town, offered a reflective account of the changing position of women in Ao society based on her lived experiences and long involvement in church and community activities. Originally from Sungratsü village and educated up to the 8th standard, she has lived in Mokokchung for nearly four decades and is now a pensioner. Although she describes herself as having limited understanding of formal politics and Urban Local Body elections, her observations provide valuable insights into gender roles, customary practices, and women's participation in social and religious institutions. She recalled that during her mother's generation, women were largely confined to domestic and agricultural work and had minimal access to education or public life. In contrast,

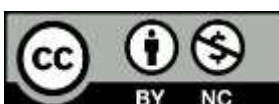




during her own childhood, educational opportunities slowly expanded, and with encouragement from her pastor father, she began schooling at the age of nine, which was uncommon at the time. She notes that women were historically excluded from governance and leadership roles in both village administration and church institutions. Through her involvement in the women's department of Mokokchung Town Church, she actively advocated for women's inclusion in the Deacon Board, which was achieved only recently with the induction of women members a few years ago, although pastoral leadership remains male-dominated. She further explains that customary laws and patriarchal norms discouraged women's political participation, often reinforced by women's own internalized beliefs. Although she once supported a female candidate in elections, societal resistance limited wider acceptance. She acknowledges recent progress, particularly the 33 percent reservation in Urban Local Bodies, which has encouraged women's participation in governance. However, she highlights continuing challenges such as financial constraints, lack of confidence, and cultural hesitation. Reflecting on inheritance practices, she noted that customary systems generally favor men, though some flexibility is emerging. As a founding member of Watsü Mungdang, she values its role in advocating women's rights. She concluded that true progress requires balanced participation of both genders while respecting tradition and embracing change.

Case Study Four: Mr. T. Senka Ao, an 82-year-old retired journalist and Padma Shri awardee from Kumlong Ward, Mokokchung Town, offered a reflective perspectives on the evolving role of women in Ao society based on his extensive experience as a writer, educator, and former Editor-in-Chief of Ao Milen. Originally from Mekuli village and trained in English and Mass Communication, he describes traditional Ao society as one where gender roles were clearly defined yet largely complementary. While women were excluded from formal religious rituals and political authority, he emphasizes that they were not marginalised and were generally accorded respect, being viewed as essential partners in family and community life. He noted that women played crucial roles in agriculture, food preparation, and collective labour, and that cultural festivals such as Moatsü symbolised mutual respect between genders. He further highlights their indirect contributions to activities like hunting and village defense through preparation and moral support, as well as their vital role in transmitting oral traditions, folktales, and clan histories, often serving as the first educators within households. On inheritance, he explained that customary practices allow widows lifelong residence rights, daughters limited inheritance of self-acquired property, and primogeniture-based succession among sons. While acknowledging historical exclusion of women from formal governance structures, he supported the 33 percent reservation for women in Urban Local Bodies as a necessary adaptation in a changing society. However, he emphasized that women must also overcome hesitation and participate more confidently in public life, as cultural norms often suppress their voices. He argues that merit, rather than gender, should guide decision-making while encouraging inclusivity from men and assertiveness from women. Nevertheless, he maintains a firm position against women's inclusion in traditional institutions such as the Putu Menden, viewing them as culturally sacred male domains. Overall, he advocates a balanced approach that preserves tradition while allowing gradual and thoughtful social transformation.

Case Study Five: Mr. Takoyaba Longkumer, an 89-year-old retired lawyer residing in Kumlong Ward, Mokokchung Town, provided a reflective legal and social perspective on the changing status of women in Ao Naga society based on his long professional experience and community engagement. Originally from Kinunger village, he is academically trained in law and arts, has lived in Mokokchung for over five decades,





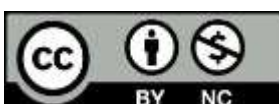
and reports an annual income of around ₹7,00,000. He strongly supported the 33 percent reservation for women in Urban Local Bodies, describing it as a necessary and progressive reform in a society where governance and decision-making were historically male-dominated. According to him, traditional Ao society largely excluded women from formal political authority and policy-making roles, confining them to domestic and supportive responsibilities. However, with the expansion of democratic governance, women are increasingly participating in administration and public decision-making, contributing valuable perspectives that enhance inclusivity and balance in leadership. He explains that customary laws historically functioned as structural barriers, particularly in relation to political participation and inheritance rights, thereby reinforcing women's marginalization. Although he acknowledged significant progress in recent years, he noted that remnants of these restrictions persist, especially at the village level where women's influence remains limited. On the question of women's inclusion in traditional institutions such as the Putu Menden, he adopts a cautious stance, suggesting that reforms should be gradual and carefully implemented to avoid disrupting customary foundations. He further advocated a preservation-oriented approach to customary law, arguing that while adaptations are necessary in response to modern needs, core traditional principles should remain intact. At the same time, he observed positive change within religious institutions, where women now experience greater inclusion in church leadership compared to the past. He maintains that leadership should be based on merit rather than gender and views reservation as a temporary but essential measure to address historical inequality until women achieve equal confidence and opportunity in public life.

Conclusion

The interface between constitutional guarantees and customary laws in Nagaland reflects an evolving process of negotiation, particularly in relation to the political representation of Ao Naga women. While the Constitution provides a strong framework for equality and affirmative action, its application is mediated by customary laws under Article 371(A), creating a dual legal system where gender justice and cultural autonomy are continually reinterpreted. The lived experiences of Ao Naga women show that political participation is shaped not only by legal provisions but also by social and cultural norms. The 33 percent reservation in Urban Local Bodies has improved women's visibility in governance, yet participation remains uneven due to persistent patriarchal attitudes and customary expectations. At the same time, customary laws are gradually changing through education, generational shifts, and civil society influence; even as key structures like inheritance and traditional authority remain male-dominated. This indicates that customary systems are both rooted and adaptable. The study further highlights that the relationship between constitutional rights and customary laws is best understood through legal pluralism rather than opposition. Within this space, Ao Naga women exercise growing agency through political, social, and institutional participation, gradually reshaping governance and advancing gender-inclusive representation.

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