



## **Negotiating Gender Role: Participation of Women in Border-Trade in Indo-Myanmar Borderland**

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### *Abstract*

*Border-trade plays a significant role at international, domestic, and local levels. The paper looks at border-trade business and transactions on the Indo-Myanmar border. The inhabitants of the Indo-Myanmar borderland have always been engaged in border-trade business. It may have to do with the fact that the communities that inhabit both sides of the border share a similar history, tradition, and culture. To some extent, the people's livelihood on the border depends on the border-trade business as various items are being traded, including legal and illegal commodities. The paper attempts to highlight the role and participation of women in border-trade business and how they negotiate their gender roles. The present study will also discuss the nature of border-trade activities, business processes, and items exclusively handled by women and whether their contribution and participation have improved their lives. The paper is based on the ethnography study conducted from March to November 2021. The study is located in Lopu, a village bordering Myanmar in the southern part of Mara Autonomous District Council (MADC), Mizoram.*

**Keywords:** *Gender, Border-Trade, Indo-Myanmar, Borderland, Negotiation.*

### **Introduction**

Border-trade is defined as 'overland trade' by way of 'exchange of commodities' from a bilaterally agreed list by people living along both sides of the international border. Most countries in the world have border-trade relations with their neighbouring countries. India also signed an agreement with its neighbouring countries, such as China, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Myanmar, etc., concerning border trade. An agreement on border-trade between India and Myanmar was signed in January 1994<sup>1</sup>. The cross border-trade business plays a significant role in the lives of the people inhabiting the Indo-Myanmar border. As mentioned, the present study is conducted in Lopu village, located in the southern part of Mizoram. Border-trade provides a livelihood for people and has an essential economic contribution. In

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the case of the present study, there are several factors such as the remoteness of the area, social-cultural ties and religious belief, and shared language that plays a huge part in providing greater economic opportunity for the people. Women have been an integral part of the whole process and made a significant economic and financial contribution to society and family by engaging in the border-trade business. However, the economic contribution made by women is largely ignored within the patriarchal structure of society.

In tribal society, and especially in the case of women in my study, women are instrumental in contributing to the economic growth by being engaged in various kinds of labours from jhuming cultivation to border-trade work (Lalhmingpuii and Namchoom, 2014). They are also actively involved in multi-tasking, such as performing all the household chores while participating in the border-trade business.

Though women's role in the economy and workforce has been often neglected and overlooked, their contribution to economic development cannot be ignored. According to the reports of International Labour Organisation 2004, in the year 2007, 1.2 billion women and 1.8 billion men were engaged in the global labour force<sup>ii</sup>. In many cases, women's work participation and productivity are much higher than males. As such, women in my study have also played an important role. In addition to their work in agriculture, household chores and performing 'women's work', they have been actively participating in border-trade business to meet the needs of their family

### **The Indo-Myanmar Border**

The Indo-Myanmar borderland is a territorial border that demarcates India and Myanmar. It was set during the colonial era, demarcating boundaries with India. The Indo-Myanmar border runs along with the three states of the Northeastern region, viz., Mizoram, Manipur and Nagaland. The Indo-Myanmar holds an interesting story. It is home to various tribes who had been divided territorially with the advent of the British in the region (Pau, 2019). It is inhabited by communities that bear the legacy of the colonial demarcation of the area, subsequently followed by the post-colonial state. The inhabitants on either side of the border were knit together by the same history, tradition and culture. There has been a continuous flow of population movement with both legal and illegal goods. The cross border-trade business and the people's everyday interaction in the borderland also acted as a binding source for the population inhabiting the border (Staudt, 2018).

With the agreement from both sides of the country (India and Myanmar), people inhabiting the border were relaxed about crossing the border up to 16 km. A forest check post at the border was set up by Mara Autonomous District Council (MADC) and maintained by the Forest Department in MADC. MADC share its largest boundary with Myanmar. At the border post, set up by MADC, there was one Forest Range Officer (FRO), Beat Officer (B.O) and forest guards. They collected taxes on goods that were taken from Myanmar. They maintained a register where people had to write their names in-out with their details. Though the MADC does not have the power to check the people's documents, this maintained the flow of goods across the border.

MADC is an Autonomous District Council located in the southern corner of Mizoram and an area inhabited by a tribe called Mara in India and are known by different names in Myanmar and its surrounding region. The region inhabited by the Mara tribe is called Marara, which means land of the Mara people. The area was annexed under the British rule in 1924 and kept under the administration of the South Lushai Hills. When the area was brought under the Lushai Hills, the British demarcated the Mara inhabited into two administrative zones: the Western and Eastern parts. The Eastern region was kept under the Chin Hills of Myanmar, and till today, they are demarcated physically and geographically.

In 1953, the Mara inhabited region was part of the Pawi-Lakher (P-L) Regional Council under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. In 1972, under the same context of the Indian Constitution, the Regional Council was given the status of Autonomous District Council known as Lakher District, which was rechristened as Mara District in 1988<sup>iii</sup>.

Mizoram shares 510 km of its international borders with Myanmar. On the western side, Tiau river acted as a borderline marking boundary between the two nation-states, i.e., India and Myanmar. Zokhawthar, a village located in Champhai district bordering Myanmar, is the functional Land Custom Station (LCS) in Mizoram with the immigration office and customs officers. However, the Indo-Myanmar borderland in MADC is the informal trading point where communities on either side of the border traded items without proper regulation from the state.

Generally, a border is usually understood as the land of demarcation or a line that separates at least two sovereign areas or spheres, marking differences between them. The fencing of the wall between the India and Pakistan border can be demonstrated in this case. The border also denoted the legitimacy of state sovereignty and has the right to exercise coercion (Banerjee, 2010). It is a symbol of state power that regulates people's movement and act as a source of information between the territories. However, the Indo-Myanmar deviates itself from the general understanding of borders. It is not only a geographical margin or territorial edges. But a space where there has been a continuous flow of population movement with goods and services.

The Indo-Myanmar borderland can be viewed as the starting point or the vantage point, a space where interaction between the two communities has occurred (Hasting and Thomas, 1999). Instead of seeing it as a point of demarcation, it has to be seen as a socio-cultural space where inhabitants on both sides of the borders meet and interact. The border is also a site of negotiation in which negotiation takes place at different levels, such as between the people and the state. The study on the border has become an area of investigation or discussion in academia. Scholars have studied the border trade relationship differently as India has adopted a new foreign policy and economic orientation towards its South Asian countries, including Myanmar. As India tried to strengthen its trade, investment, and economic cooperation with the ASEAN countries, Myanmar is the 'getaway' as India shares both land and maritime borders with Myanmar (Shahriar, 2020:2). With the adoption of

policies such as the Look East Policy/ Act East Policy, the interest of scholars turned their attention towards Indo-Myanmar border trade (ibid, 2020).

The Indian border with Myanmar, though it was militarily sensitive, is not closed in the same way as Pakistan and Bangladesh (Vijayan, 2021). In that case, there are varying ways in which the borderland conceptualise and experience the presence of the state. So, by reflecting upon the role of women, the state-border-people relations can be understood more subtly and lucidly. While on the northern neighbours i.e. India-Bangladesh-Pakistan, documents were required to cross the borders or to even meet their families. India has opened its border with Myanmar, where people on both sides can freely move around the border up to 16 km. However, documents or passports are still required to enter the main city. The Identification cards, or permission letter from the Village Council President, is needed (the permission letter has to be taken from Ralie village<sup>iv</sup>). Acquiring IDs or permission letters was not a problem as women's traders have already connections or friends on the other side of the border, i.e., Myanmar.

### **Lopu Village**

Lopu village is located 57 km south of the district headquarter, Siaha. The Arakan area in Myanmar surrounds the village. Ralie is the nearest village to India. The village is heterogeneous in terms of its inhabitants. About 12 tribes sparsely populate it. Prominent tribes among them are Mara from the Indian side of the border, Lushai, Matu, Khumi, Heima, Sabyh and Pawan<sup>v</sup> etc. Apart from the Mara who are from the Indian side of the border, the other mentioned tribes mainly migrated from Myanmar in search of better livelihood, and some migrated due to the political movement in Mizoram during the 1960s. At the same time, some migrated due to mautam (bamboo flowering) in Myanmar. The harsh economic condition in Myanmar compelled families to live on the Indian side of the border (Fachhai, 2009). A handful of the Rakhine people also reside in the village.

As per the 2011 census of the Government of India<sup>vi</sup>, there are 223 households with a population of 1074. Out of which, 551 are males, and 523 are females. The village literacy rate was 88.73 per cent. The male literacy stands at 90 per cent, while the female literacy rate was 87.44 per cent. Out of the total population, 527 were engaged in work activities. 93.36 per cent of workers described their work as main work (employment or earning more than six months). While 6.64 per cent were involved in marginal activity providing a livelihood for less than six months. Of 527 workers engaged in main work, 402 were cultivators (owner or co-owner), while 15 were agricultural labourers. The villagers owned jhum cultivation, which was the source of their survival, and the village was self-sufficient in rice production. The village economy is mainly based on cattle, jhum cultivation and agricultural labours or crops.

As per the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India, the District Councils for Autonomous District Councils are empowered to make laws with regards to Executive, Legislative and Judicial. The Autonomous District Councils are also empowered to constitute Village councils and Village courts. With the power conferred on it by the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India, Lopu falls within the jurisdiction of Mara Autonomous District

Council (MADC). The Mara Autonomous District Village Councils Act was enacted in 1974<sup>vii</sup>. This Act was extended to the whole of the Mara District Council area. The village administration rests in the hand of Village Councils, who are the elected representative of the people.

### **Women in Lopu Village**

Women constitute more than half of the population in Lopu. The ratio of differences in population and literacy rate between males and females was not high. Out of the 1074 population, women constitute 523 of the population. In terms of literacy, the male literacy rate stands at 90 per cent, while the female literacy rate is at 87.44 per cent<sup>viii</sup>. Despite the high literature rate, women's engagement in the political sphere is almost invisible. Also, women continue to occupy an inferior position in one of the most important institutions, such as the church. Women were given platform only in the women's wing associations such as Mara ChanoPy (MCHP) and Krizyhpa No Py (KNP)/Women's Fellowship. Gender inequality in decision-making positions within the church is evident.

According to the Mara Autonomous District Council Amendment Act, 2012, one of the total number of elected seats was reserved for women (MADC Amendment Act, 2012, section 3 (4)). The status of women cannot be fully developed as the village embraced the patriarchal norms and values when it comes to giving a platform to women in the decision-making process (Sinha and Lalrinchhani, 2013). Although women constitute more than half of the entire village's population and have been actively participating in all kinds of work just as their male counterparts, they continue to be treated as secondary citizens, and gender roles and responsibilities remain the same. Though women earn monthly income by engaging in border trade business, the responsibility to take care of the household and raise children still rests on their shoulders. One of the women in my study points out, 'Raihriaawhpaabyu, hria lei khianie lei awhpatla cha' meaning' (I need to work, if not, we won't have anything to eat). This view is also shared by many other women who work-hard to bring something to the table while negotiating their gender role every day. Women in the borderland engaged in all kinds of labours for their survival. Apart from engaging in jhum cultivation and agricultural labours, some women earned their living by cattle rearing, weaving and running petty shops to feed their families.

Based on the study, traditional beliefs about gender roles and women are still prevalent. Norms, tradition and cultural practices justify the gender division of labour. Women are continued to be seen as caretakers of the home and family members. As Kramer pointed out, 'all cultures have accorded sex and gender a central place in explaining how the world is and should be. Most significantly, every culture of which researchers know has been patriarchal to some degree' (Kramer, 2001:26). Hence, gender inequality could be witnessed in different forms and set up. For instance, the expectation of men to be economic providers of the family and women to be the family's caregivers is the gender norm in different cultural contexts (Kramer, 2001). At the same time, women contributed enormously towards substantiating the family economy and society at large. Their contributions in many ways take in the form of providing labour for youth and offering in the church. As one of the

respondents said, 'Since we have to load and unload the goods, for this matter, we usually hired youths at the village by paying them pocket money. And for carrying goods, we hired trucks from the village. This is the way how we can help others too'.

The above statement shows how women traders in Lopu played a significant role in the village economy. Not only this, women's contribution to the church in the form of tithe<sup>ix</sup> is also noteworthy.

### **Women Traders and their Contribution**

There is a lack of literature regarding women in the borderland. Some of the work includes Banerjee (2010) that deals with the border and women in the context of India, and the work of Anzaldua (2004). Anzaldua argued that territories are socially constructed, creating borders and redrawn boundaries. She argued in the context of the USA and Mexico. The creation of borders between these areas resulted in the Mexican losing half of its territory and the subsequent stigmatisation of the Mexican-American/Chicanos, which created the notion of 'others' and 'foreigner'. The work of Anzaldua is crucial as it depicts a discourse on women in the US-Mexico borderland. These writings are essential while analysing women's experiences on the border. Women's experiences can be different from the male, as women on the border sought to improve their livelihood by using various forms of negotiation.

Based on the present study, the experiences and perspective of women in borderland reflect their daily struggle and how they negotiate gender roles to survive. It has been observed that it was women who carried out the economic transaction. To some extent, women benefits from border trade; for instance, the border trade business allows women to earn money which enables them to feed the family and give them some security. Since they were carrying out transactions within international borders, women had to negotiate with the state agency at both levels, such as MADC and Assam Rifles at the Indian side of the border and on the other side; they had to deal with Myanmar military. One of my respondents narrated how they negotiated with the armies on the Myanmar side:

*My friend and I went to Myanmar to procure dried ginger. Since we have been there many times, we know that the Myanmar armies like India cigarette. So, we brought an Indian cigarette with us and gave it to the armies at the check post. This makes it easier for us to pass through the check post and do whatever we have to do in Myanmar.*

She also added that they should be generous towards the armies at the check post to carry out the business smoothly and without any hindrance from the military. In this way, women manage their business and negotiate with officials, such as offering gifts of goods. Regardless of the political challenges, women in borderland performed, contributed and played a significant role in sustaining border business trade for their families and survival.

It has also been observed that Indian cigarette (i.e. Farstar, Gold Flake etc) is used as one of the tools for women in bribing the Myanmar officials in order to carry out their business smoothly. Another interesting reality is that the continuous business trade carried

out by women on the border helped them to bond with each other. The journey has brought them together as a family, and they take care of each other. In some instances, women had to overstay at the other side of the border while carrying out business. In those times, they do not need to worry about where to stay, where to eat as they have already had families (extended) or friends at the other side of the border.

When asked whether they face any volatile political environment, one of the respondents shared her story as, 'So far, we do not face problems while carrying out business in the neighbouring border, but going inside a place where the military (Myanmar) were tight, we carried out business with anxiety and agony in our heart'. The traders from the Indian side of the border we're not allowed to overstay at the city. In those cases, they said, 'They have come to the city to collect their money or come for funeral services. Traders from both sides of the border usually exchange their products at the border itself or Ralie village. This was done to carry out business without any hurdles from the military (India and Myanmar).

In most cases, they organised these exchanges in advance through phone calls. This is a helpful strategy in a politically volatile environment as it makes it easier to co-operate with fellow traders from Myanmar. In addition to this, the study shows shared ethnicity is advantageous for women traders to enhance their business trade and use as a negotiation tool.

### **Goods and Items**

The cross-border trade business here takes place via the Forest Check post and the Assam Rifle camp located at the outskirts of the village. During the fieldwork, it has been observed that women traders in the borderland usually travel in a group. This may have to do with safety concerns for women. Some of the items procured from Myanmar include dried ginger, animals such as pigs, cows, fermented fish etc. The dried ginger business is prevalent among the traders in the borderland. The buyers of dried ginger are mainly from Bagha, Assam in India. The price is generally fixed at Rs 250-270/- per kg, and they can carry seven quintals (i.e. 700 kilograms) per transaction. From India, an item such as elephant foot yam is popular. The elephant foot yam was usually taken from Bagha, Silchar, priced at Rs 180/- per kg in Myanmar. The item is generally transported to Myanmar via Lopu village, where women traders from Lopu are the acting middle person between traders from both India and Myanmar. In this transaction, women usually pay Rs 10/- per kg for identifying buyers from Myanmar.

Apart from dried ginger and elephant foot yam transactions, peddling cows and pigs from Myanmar is common among the traders. These kinds of animals were cheaper in Myanmar. For instance, the cow bred in India usually costs Rs 60000/- while it costs only around Rs 45000/- in Myanmar (INR). Hence, cows are generally transported from Myanmar, and the minimum price normally starts from Rs 55000/- in India, which means the profit is Rs 10000/-. Business transactions in the form of animals have become popular. Apart from the business trade, people living in the borderland interacted daily, even to procure their daily needs or for transporting petty goods across the border. Women were also involved in the money transaction business; however, this was not very prevalent as the other items. As

mentioned before, the shared history, beliefs, tradition, language and cultures continue to play an essential role in bringing people together from both sides of the borders. This close-kinship and relations are highly visible and become more assertive in times of political turmoil as they take care of each other. Based on the present study, it has been observed that border-trade business provides economic mobility for women, such as stepping out of their homes, selling their products, and earning money to support themselves and their families. To quote one of the traders, she said, 'My father is a government servant; in many cases, his salary was not sufficient for the family as all my younger siblings have to continue their studies in different parts of the country. In those times, I was able to help my parents with the money I earned from this business trade'.

In a way, women are appreciated by their families for their hard-earned labour and are no longer considered a burden. As pointed out by Kramer 'an individual's link to the economy have a crucial influence on many aspects of the quality of that person's life: political power, material well-being, access to educational opportunities, and even length of life are closely tied to one's position in the stratification system' (Kramer, 2001:115). To a certain extent, women's economic contribution is appreciated and seems to help them have limited personal autonomy. However, based on my study, women are still considered inferior to men in society.

## **Conclusion**

Though feminists have raised the issue of inequality between men and women and have challenged the patriarchal structure of society, inequality based on gender still exists. The division of labour based on gender, attitudes such as men as 'superior' beings and women as 'soft' and 'care giver' persist today. The gender gap in accessing resources, rights, privileges, power and influence, and the level of participation is prevalent. Women receive lower wages for similar work and are more likely to be in low-paid jobs, and unsecured positions (i.e. part-time, temporary, home-based), and have less access than men to productive assets such as education, skills, and property credit. In this regard, promoting women's economic rights and independence, accessing employment and appropriate working conditions, and giving them the right to control economic resources is needed. Since women are carrying out business within international boundaries, there should be proper laws and regulations regarding markets and trade in the borderland. The authority could foster formal trade and build a relationship with the neighbouring country. This could further scale up economic activities on the border, further resulting in more significant employment and a poverty reduction. Regular consultation of the border official on both sides is also needed for proper border management. This would additionally create harmonisation, and women could carry out business without any tension. The authority could also open up a start-up for the women in the borderland as most women who carried out business on the border do not have capital. In most cases, women start their businesses mainly by borrowing money from money lenders or taking loans from bank.

In the case of the Lopu-Myanmar border, it was the Forest Department, MADC, who maintained the record data. As for the Assam Rifle, no record data was kept. To some extent,

the presence of Assam Rifle created tension environment for people who are engaging in border trade. The border-trade in the Indo-Myanmar borderland in MADC is not as populated, compared at other Indo-Myanmar borders such as Zokhawthar in Champhai District or Moreh in Manipur. Recently, in Mizoram, the areca nuts business has become an important issue across the border. There are incidents where the military crackdown on illegal<sup>x</sup> trade across the border in Zokhawthar village. Other illegal transactions commonly carried out in Zokhawthar border trade include gold, weapons, tiger skin, rhino horns, and drugs like heroin and yaba. The commodities traded along the Lopu-Myanmar border include fermented fish, elephant food yam, dried ginger, tobacco, medicines, coconut, edible items, electronics such as television, vehicles and parts, and animals cow and pig, goats etc. Based on the study, it can be stated that the inhabitants of the Indo-Myanmar borderland are increasingly engaged in border-trade and economic transactions. And the role and participation of women in border-trade business cannot be ignored as they continuously contribute to the economy of the village and family.

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**Endnote**

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<sup>i</sup>For details about border trade see <http://mdoner.gov.in/content/border-trade> accessible online

<sup>ii</sup>This report can be seen at *Women in labour markets: Measuring progress and identifying challenges* by international Labour Office accessible online

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[https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_emp/---emp\\_elm/-trends/documents/publication/wcms\\_123835.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/---emp_elm/-trends/documents/publication/wcms_123835.pdf)

<sup>iii</sup>For an engagement on the history of Mara see K. Zohra (2013)

<sup>iv</sup>A village located on the Myanmar side of the border

<sup>v</sup>Interview conducted by the author with village elders by the author

<sup>vi</sup>The village populations, literacy rate were taken from 2011 census of India accessible online <https://www.census2011.co.in/data/village/271820-lungpuk-mizoram.html>

<sup>vii</sup>See A Compilation of Acts, Rules and Regulations Under Mara Autonomous District Council (2016)

<sup>viii</sup>For the status of women in Lopu, see census 2011 accessible online <https://www.census2011.co.in/data/village/271820-lungpuk-mizoram.html>

<sup>ix</sup> As per Christian practices, one tenth of annual produce or earning was contributed for the support of the church

<sup>x</sup>For the illegal trade across Zokhawthar border trade, see <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/assam-rifles-crack-down-on-illegal-trade-on-indo-myanmar-border/story-H5YuKdPHM51983cNVw723I.html>