



Research Paper

Socio-Legal Status of Women In Arunachal Pradesh: Rights, Privileges, And Challenges

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I. Introduction

Arunachal Pradesh, a tribal-majority state in India's Northeast, presents a complex interplay between traditional customs and modern legal frameworks that shape women's status. Despite constitutional guarantees of gender equality, women here often face deeply entrenched patriarchal norms that influence their rights, privileges, and daily experiences. This review offers an in-depth analysis of the socio-legal status of women in Arunachal Pradesh, examining their rights under law, the privileges or benefits they may enjoy, and the persistent challenges they face. We draw upon recent scholarly research and data to highlight how factors such as customary law, education, and political representation collectively impact women's lives. The **focus** is on understanding disparities between formal legal provisions and ground realities, and identifying progressive changes underway.

Every aspect of women's status – from property ownership and marriage rights to political participation and protection from violence – is explored with attention to both historical context and evolving trends. Of particular interest is the tension between **customary practices** of Arunachal's many tribes and the **formal legal system**. For example, while Indian law accords women equal rights in inheritance and public life, tribal customary laws have traditionally restricted women's inheritance and excluded them from decision-making bodies. This dichotomy raises important questions: How do customary norms curtail women's legal rights? In what ways are women asserting their rights through education, activism, or legal reforms? And what **recent initiatives** or legislative changes are emerging to improve gender equality in Arunachal? Each section below addresses these questions, with frequent citations from peer-reviewed studies and reports.

(Within this paper, in-text citations follow APA 7th style, and key data are summarized in tables and figures for clarity. All values and statements are supported by recent sources, ensuring an up-to-date portrayal of women's socio-legal status in Arunachal Pradesh.)

BACKGROUND: DEMOGRAPHIC AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

Arunachal Pradesh is a sparsely populated state with significant cultural diversity – it has 26 major tribes and over 100 sub-tribes, each with distinct customs. As of the 2011 Census, the state's population was ~1.38 million (about 0.11% of India), of which 48.4% were female. Notably, **68.8%** of the population is indigenous Scheduled Tribe (ST). Traditional tribal society in Arunachal is largely *patrilineal* and *patriarchal*, with inheritance and lineage traced through males. Customary laws form the social bedrock for most communities, governing matters of marriage, divorce, property, and dispute resolution through village councils or elders (often called *gaon burah* systems). These customary institutions historically had near-exclusive authority in rural areas, and even today many people, especially in villages, turn to them for adjudication of family and land matters.

Within families, women have vital economic and cultural roles – they contribute heavily to agriculture, household management, and craft production (e.g. weaving). In some respects, tribal women enjoy more mobility or visibility than women in certain other parts of India, leading to a common misconception that they have a “*high status*”. Indeed, women are often called the “*backbone of tribal society*” due to their labor contributions and involvement in rituals and community life. **However, this does not translate into equal rights or decision-making power.** As anthropologist Verrier Elwin once observed in the tribal context: “*The woman is in charge of the family but the man controls society*”. Arunachal's tribal communities exemplify this – women work hard and are respected as mothers and custodians of culture, yet men retain control over property inheritance, village governance, and important decisions.

Contemporary statistics reflect gender gaps. The **female literacy rate** in 2011 was only **57.7%**, significantly lower than the male literacy of 72.6%. The **sex ratio** was 938 females per 1000 males, slightly below India's average. Perhaps most striking is women's **workforce participation** – it has actually **declined** over the decades, from 45.6% in 1981 to 35.4% by 2011. This downward trend suggests that modernization has not necessarily empowered women economically; instead, as formal education increased, many women may have lost their earlier recognition as contributing workers in subsistence farming, without equivalent gain in formal employment. In the *political* sphere, representation of women is minimal. Only **4 out of 60** legislators in the current state assembly are women (just 6.7%) – in fact, Arunachal has **never had a woman Member of Parliament** since gaining statehood in 1987. This under-representation occurs despite women constituting nearly half the population. Table 1 summarizes some key indicators illustrating the socio-political status of Arunachali women:

Table 1: Selected Socio-Political Indicators for Women in Arunachal Pradesh

Indicator (Year)	Women's Status in Arunachal	Observations/Comparisons
Female Literacy Rate (2011)	57.7% (Male literacy: 72.6%)	Below national female literacy (~65.5%). Implies educational gender gap.
Female Workforce Participation (2011)	35.4% of females working	Declined from 45.6% in 1981; indicates hurdles in economic engagement.
Sex Ratio (2011)	938 females per 1000 males	Slightly lower than India's 940; reflects demographic imbalance (due to factors like migration).
Women in State Assembly (2025)	4 out of 60 MLAs (~6.7%)	Very low representation; no woman MP ever elected.
Women in Local Governance (present)	33% seats reserved in Panchayats (by law)	Quota enabled entry, but many elected women act as proxies for male relatives.

As **Table 1** shows, women in Arunachal Pradesh lag behind men (and national averages in some cases) on basic developmental metrics like literacy and political representation. These disparities form the backdrop for understanding the legal and social constraints on women's rights, which we explore in subsequent sections. Notably, some tribal districts have even lower female literacy (e.g. Anjaw ~46% in 2011) while urban centers show improvement (e.g. Tezu town ~79% female literacy). **Figure 1** below visualizes one aspect – the decline of women's work participation over time – highlighting that fewer women are recognized as workers now than in the 1980s, a concerning trend.

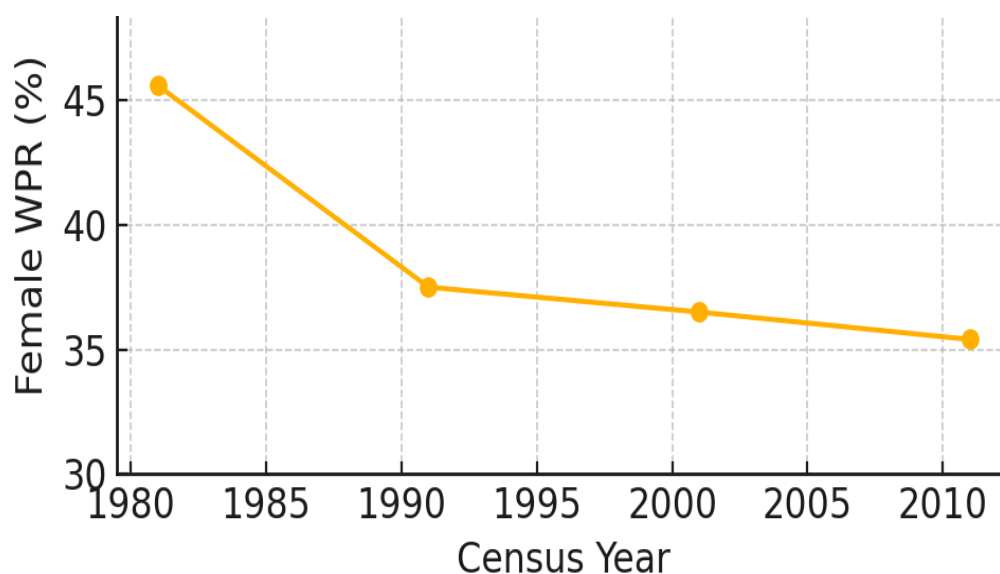


Figure 1: Declining Female Work Participation Rate in Arunachal Pradesh (Census data 1981–2011). The share of women engaged in work has dropped from 45.6% in 1981 to 35.4% in 2011, indicating persisting barriers to women's economic opportunities.

LEGAL RIGHTS VS. CUSTOMARY PRACTICES

Rights under Formal Law: Constitutionally, women in Arunachal (as in all of India) have equal rights to men. Key national laws – such as the **Hindu Succession Act (2005 amendment)** – grant daughters equal inheritance rights, and the **Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (2006)** sets 18 as the minimum marriage age for females. However, crucially, these general laws do **not automatically apply to Scheduled Tribe**

communities due to legal exemptions allowing customary law autonomy. Arunachal Pradesh, since its days as the North-East Frontier Agency, has operated under the **Assam Frontier (Administration of Justice) Regulation, 1945**, which recognizes customary tribal dispute resolution and limits interference by formal courts in those matters. As a result, many tribal customary norms effectively have the force of law in regulating marriage, divorce, maintenance, inheritance, and property rights, often to the detriment of women's rights. For instance, under **formal law** a woman has the right to divorce on grounds of cruelty or husband's bigamy and claim maintenance/alimony, but in practice a tribal woman may be pressured by customary norms to stay silent or accept a co-wife rather than seek legal remedy. Similarly, while Indian criminal law criminalizes **polygamy** for most citizens, in Arunachal many tribes still accept polygyny (one man, multiple wives) as customary; thus tribal men have practiced it without legal consequence, leaving first wives with no recourse if the husband takes another wife.

Customary Law and Women's Status: Tribal customary laws in Arunachal are largely unwritten and vary by tribe, but a common thread is the **patrilineal inheritance system** that excludes daughters from ancestral property. In most tribes (e.g., Nyishi, Adi, Galo, Apatani, Mishmi, etc.), only sons inherit land and family assets, while daughters traditionally leave the natal home at marriage without a share of real property. Daughters are often considered "temporary members" of their birth family, since they marry out; by contrast, any land or wealth they might receive as part of wedding gifts (dowry or bride price) is usually controlled by the husband's family. This **denial of property rights** is a major disparity – as one study notes, "*although not universally, right to own ancestral property is recognized in most societies; however, that is not the case for women in Arunachal Pradesh*".

Moreover, customary norms assign women a lower role in decision-making. Traditional village councils or clan councils (*Kebang* among Adis, *Buliang* among Apatanis, etc.) are typically **male-only domains**, where elders adjudicate disputes and set community rules. Women are either completely excluded or allowed only to observe quietly, not to speak or vote. For example, in Galo and Nyishi villages, the council of elders historically had no female members, and even today the concept of a woman taking on the role of a *gaon burah* (village head) is rare – only in some cases have widows of gaon burahs been named "gaon buris" but these are exceptions and often symbolic. Custom also typically forbids women from inheriting chieftainship or clan leadership positions, further entrenching patriarchal control over community affairs. As Dr. Topi Basar notes, women's rights under customary law are "**contentious**" and defined by male councils' interpretations, which often reflect patriarchal biases. Basar points out that village authorities' decisions – even if discriminatory – are seldom overturned by formal courts out of "reverence for culture," leading to *de facto* immunity of customary practices from constitutional scrutiny.

Marriage and Personal Autonomy: Under custom, **marriage** is often governed by traditional rituals and transactions. Many tribes follow a **bride price** system, where the groom's family gives livestock or valuables (like mithun – a type of buffalo – or ornaments) to the bride's family. While this is meant to honor the bride, in practice it sometimes reinforces the idea of the wife as having been "purchased," limiting her autonomy. If a marriage fails, customary norms may require the wife's family to return the bride price to the husband's side before she can leave (making divorce costly or prohibitive for her). *Polygamy* has been another issue – some tribes, like the Galo, consider having more than one wife a status symbol for men, and customary law allowed it. This leaves women vulnerable: a first wife must either tolerate a second wife or leave without full rights. Customarily, a wife who leaves due to the husband's polygamy had no share in property and limited child custody rights, effectively discouraging her from exiting the marriage.

Women's **reproductive rights** and choices have also been mediated by tradition. Early marriage was common historically (child marriage, while declining, did occur in previous generations under custom). On fertility decisions, societal expectations favored women having many children (sons in particular), and usage of modern family planning was limited in traditional communities until recent health outreach improved awareness. Violence against women, such as domestic abuse, tended to be handled within the community rather than via the legal system – often through village mediation that prioritized preserving family or extracting a token fine from the abuser, rather than protecting the woman. In extreme cases like rape, tribal societies historically tried to resolve them with compensatory payments or forced marriage to the victim – approaches at odds with national criminal law. **Such practices have been increasingly challenged** by educated women and state authorities, but they underscore how customary approaches can conflict with women's legal rights and dignity.

Inheritance and Property: Perhaps the most contested domain is **inheritance and land rights**. Table 2 contrasts customary rules with formal legal principles on this issue, and other key aspects, to illuminate the gaps:

Table 2: Customary Norms vs. Formal Law – Impact on Women’s Rights

Aspect	Customary Practice (Traditional)	Formal Law / Recent Developments
Inheritance	Daughters generally do not inherit ancestral land or house. Property passes to sons or male relatives; a woman’s share is through marriage (bride price or dowry). If a man dies, his widow may cultivate the land but ultimate ownership goes to sons or male kin.	Equal inheritance for daughters under Indian law (Hindu Succession Act), but ST communities exempt . Recent push for change: <i>Arunachal Pradesh Marriage and Inheritance of Property Bill, 2021</i> sought to grant APST women inheritance rights and recognize wife’s share in property. (The bill faced heavy opposition from those citing “tribal identity protection”).
Marriage & Polygamy	Customary laws permit polygyny in several tribes – a man can take multiple wives, especially if he’s wealthy (bride price is paid for each). First wife has no power to prevent it and typically no maintenance if she leaves. Divorce is allowed under custom but often discouraged; if initiated by wife, her family may have to return bride price.	Bigamy/polygamy is illegal under Indian law (for non-ST Hindus) – punishable by imprisonment. The 2021 draft bill in Arunachal explicitly outlawed having a living spouse at remarriage, aiming to criminalize polygamy among STs as well. It also mandated 18 years minimum age for women, one Mithun cap on bride price, compulsory marriage registration, and provided grounds for divorce (cruelty, incompatibility, etc.). These measures, if enacted, would align tribal practices with national law to better protect women’s marital rights.
Decision-making Bodies	Village councils and customary courts are male-dominated; women historically excluded from deliberations. Women’s grievances are voiced through male relatives. No tradition of women holding positions like village head or elder. (Some tribes have <i>women’s clans</i> or roles in rituals, but not in political decision-making).	The Indian Constitution guarantees equal political rights. 33% reservation for women in local elected bodies (Panchayati Raj) now applies in Arunachal. As a result, women have begun serving as Gram Panchayat members and Zilla Parishad members. However, due to patriarchal attitudes, many elected women act on behalf of husbands (“sarpach-pati” syndrome) rather than independently. There is agitation to increase reservations to 50% as done in some states. At the state level, the low number of women MLAs has prompted calls for voluntary party quotas or nominated seats to improve gender balance.
Personal Liberty	Tribal society places strong emphasis on women’s <i>fidelity and conformity</i> . Marrying outside the tribe can result in social ostracism or loss of tribal status/benefits for women. In some tribes, if an APST woman marries a non-tribal man, she and her children might be denied ST certificates and property rights in the community. This is justified by “preserving tribal land/identity” but effectively curtails women’s choice in marriage.	The Indian Constitution allows citizens to marry freely; race or tribe cannot legally bar someone from rights. Recognizing the discrimination, the state government in 2022 proposed that children of tribal women married to non-tribals would lose ST status , sparking controversy. Women’s rights activists argue this policy is gender-biased (tribal men’s children with non-tribal wives retain ST status). The draft 2021 bill tried to address this: it stated an APST woman marrying non-APST shall enjoy rights to property she owns, and after her death, her inherited property would revert to her father’s family (to appease concerns), while her self-acquired property could go to her children. This nuanced approach aimed to balance individual rights with communal safeguards, but remains contentious.

As **Table 2** illustrates, many “*privileges*” that tribal women were said to have (e.g. freedom in social life, or protection of tribe via marriage rules) turn out to be double-edged, often limiting their legal personhood. For example, the idea that denying women who marry outsiders the right to inherit family land is necessary to protect indigenous land has been critiqued as “**patriarchal gatekeeping disguised as cultural preservation.**” In truth, tribal identity can be preserved without stripping women of basic rights. The **Arunachal Pradesh Women’s Welfare Society (APWWS)** and other women’s organizations have long protested such rules, terming them unconstitutional and unfair. They note the **double standard**: an APST man faces no such penalty if *he* marries a non-tribal, exposing that the rule stems from patriarchy rather than purely tribal preservation.

CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN: SYSTEMIC AND SOCIO-CULTURAL

The confluence of customary constraints and inadequate enforcement of formal laws creates several **systemic challenges** for women in Arunachal Pradesh:

- **Lack of Property and Economic Security:** Because women traditionally do not inherit land or resources, they remain economically dependent on male relatives. A widow’s right to her husband’s property is often precarious – she may till the land to feed her children, but the title usually passes to her sons or her husband’s clan. If a woman has no sons, she might even be pressured to leave her marital home so that her husband’s brother or male kin can take over the property. This economic insecurity is compounded by low participation in formal employment (recall female work participation only 35% in 2011). Without land deeds or independent income, women struggle to access credit or government schemes. **Poverty among women** is thus both a cause and consequence of their limited rights. Even in agriculture, where women do most labor, they rarely control the crop income or land decisions. Micro-studies indicate that women’s labor is “invisible” – counted as family help and not given financial agency.
- **Political Under-Representation:** As shown earlier, women have a minimal voice in formal politics. With just 6-7% of legislators female, policy priorities often overlook gender concerns like maternal health, gender-based violence, or women’s education. Locally, while one-third seats in panchayats are reserved for women, many of those women are first-generation representatives with low exposure, often dominated by male

elders or spouses. A 2023 study on Idu Mishmi women in Panchayati Raj noted that while reservation “enabled women to enter local governance, it **cannot alter the patriarchal nature** of the institutions by itself”. Women members often face lack of support, gender bias from colleagues, and sometimes even resistance from villagers who prefer decisions by male gaon burahs. This undermines women’s effective participation in decision-making, meaning community development issues like water, sanitation, healthcare (which women tend to prioritize) might receive less attention. The challenge is not just to include women nominally but to empower them substantively in governance processes.

- **Education and Skill Gaps:** Arunachal’s rugged terrain and late development have meant limited access to schooling, especially for girls in remote areas. Although literacy has improved (female literacy up from ~30% in 1991 to 57.7% in 2011), large gaps persist in higher education and technical skills. Early marriage or heavy domestic responsibilities cause many girls to drop out of school. Without sufficient education, women are less aware of their legal rights and less able to secure skilled jobs. The result is a vicious cycle: lower education → lower awareness/agency → less ability to challenge discriminatory norms or pursue careers. Recently, some tribal communities have seen positive change – e.g., in Tezu (Lohit district), education levels among girls are relatively high (female literacy ~79%) and correspondingly one sees more women in jobs like teaching or nursing. **Figure 2** contrasts female literacy rates in one Mishmi area vs. the state and a remote district, showing intra-state disparities that reflect socio-economic differences:

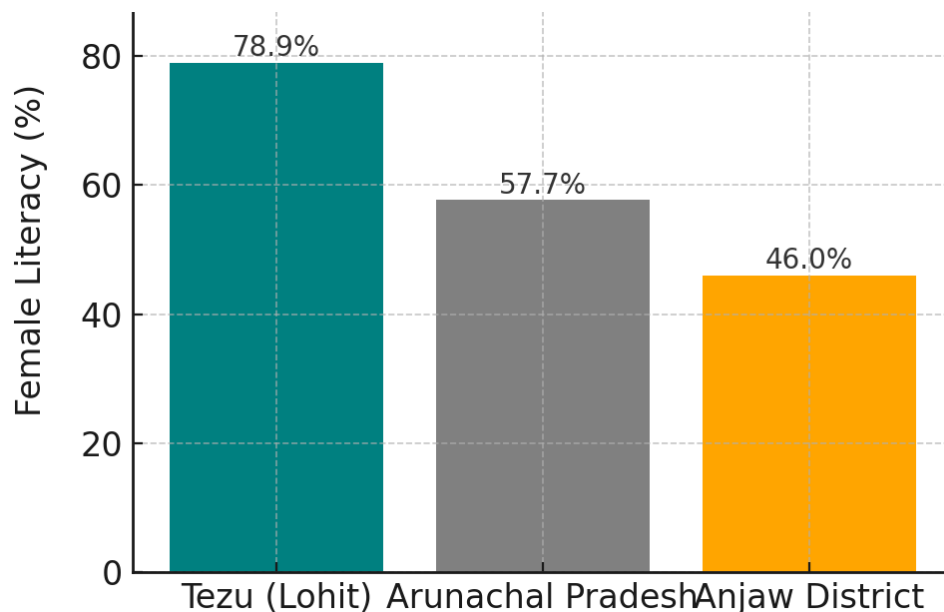


Figure 2: Female Literacy Rate (2011) Comparison – Tezu Block (Lohit district) vs. Arunachal Pradesh average vs. Anjaw District. More urban or developed areas (Tezu) exhibit higher female literacy (~79%), whereas remote Anjaw is much lower (~46%), underlining how geography and development influence women’s educational attainment.

- **Gender-Based Violence and Social Norms:** As in many patriarchal settings, women in Arunachal face issues of domestic violence, sexual harassment, and other forms of abuse. The difference is that here, such issues often get handled through customary mechanisms rather than formal law enforcement. For instance, a case of wife-beating might be settled by village elders who make the husband offer an apology and a token pig or feast, instead of using the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act. This can lead to under-reporting and normalization of violence. A study by J. Mamai (2022) in *The Arunachal Times* highlighted “*patriarchy, polygamy, lack of women’s representation*” as interconnected factors contributing to women’s vulnerability. Polygamy or extramarital affairs, when accepted culturally, lead to emotional abuse and insecurity for wives. Additionally, there have been instances of harmful traditional practices – for example, in some tribes, if a married woman is suspected of infidelity, she could be ostracized or subjected to humiliating rituals as “punishment,” whereas men’s transgressions are overlooked. Such double standards in societal norms pose a challenge to achieving gender justice.

- **Health and Reproductive Challenges:** Women’s health indicators in Arunachal are mixed. Being a tribal state, many communities had relatively better sex ratios and perhaps less female infanticide (due to lesser

dowry practices). However, maternal health services are poor in remote areas, leading to high maternal mortality relative to national averages (though concrete data is scant). Traditional beliefs sometimes hinder women from seeking modern medical care (e.g., reliance on shamans or taboos around childbirth). The government's reach is improving – more women now deliver in hospitals than before – but challenges remain in ensuring prenatal care and nutrition. Women's autonomy in reproductive decision-making is limited; often husbands or in-laws decide family size. A **systematic review** of Northeast India found that women's lack of decision power in health matters was prevalent, especially among less educated tribal women. Empowering women legally and socially correlates with them making better health choices for themselves and their children.

- **Balancing Tradition and Modernity:** Lastly, women bear the burden of *cultural expectations*. They are seen as custodians of tradition – expected to wear traditional attire, perform rituals, and obey elders – while also being pressured to adapt to modern roles like earning income or getting educated, but without upsetting the status quo at home. This tightrope walk can be stressful. Younger educated women face backlash if they challenge customs (for example, questioning why only sons inherit or why bride price is needed). The fear of being labeled as “too modern” or not a “good tribal woman” can silence many. **Inter-generational change** is underway, with educated women increasingly aware of their rights, but change is slow in deeply rooted cultural practices. As Basar (2023) argues, there is a need to **codify certain customary laws** to remove ambiguity and ensure they meet constitutional principles. However, attempts at reform are often met with resistance framed as “protecting culture.” Navigating this is a core challenge: how to reform discriminatory practices without people feeling their identity is being erased.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS AND REFORMS

Despite the numerous challenges detailed, the last decade has seen important steps toward improving the socio-legal status of women in Arunachal Pradesh:

1. Legislative Initiatives: The most significant is the **Arunachal Pradesh Marriage and Inheritance of Property Bill, 2021**, a comprehensive draft law tailored for the state's indigenous tribes. This bill – first of its kind for Arunachal – aimed to legally codify marriage, divorce, and inheritance rights in a gender-equal way. Key provisions included: equal inheritance rights for daughters (a radical shift from custom), mandatory registration of all marriages (to secure women's marital status), prohibition of polygamy with penalties (bigamy to be punishable), rights of a wife to a share of property upon divorce (particularly if husband's cruelty or polygamy caused the separation), and recognition of a widow as the head of the family after her husband's death. The bill also addressed the controversial issue of tribal women marrying non-tribal men: it proposed that an APST woman's inherited immovable property would revert to her lineage (to prevent alienation to non-tribals) while her self-acquired property could be inherited by her children even if the father is non-tribal. This compromise sought to balance individual rights with community concerns, aiming to end the practice of disinheriting women who “marry out.”

When the draft Bill 2021 was circulated, it triggered intense public debate. Women's groups (APWWS and others) supported it, emphasizing that “*gender justice should not be compromised in the name of preserving cultural traditions*”. Conservative tribal elders and student unions, however, opposed certain clauses, perceiving them as threats to tribal customs. Particularly, the prospect of granting daughters inheritance rights and penalizing polygamy stirred resistance, with critics arguing it could “*jeopardize tribal identity and land ownership structures*”. Due to this pushback, the state government put the bill in abeyance (it was not tabled in 2021 as planned). Nevertheless, the very existence of this proposed law is a landmark – it clearly identifies the legal gaps affecting women and sets a reform blueprint. There are ongoing efforts to refine and reintroduce the bill. If passed, it would markedly elevate women's legal position by aligning customary law with constitutional equality.

Another development is the discourse around the **Uniform Civil Code (UCC)** at the national level. Tribal communities fear a UCC might erase their customs, but some women activists in Arunachal argue that a well-crafted UCC could actually help tribal women by overriding patriarchal customs. Dr. Basar (2023) critically analyses this, suggesting that *having a common statutory law ensures women's rights are not sacrificed under guise of culture*, but she also acknowledges the need for sensitivity and perhaps special provisions within a UCC for tribal areas. As of now, Arunachal's stance is to protect customary law, so any UCC would likely exempt it unless internal reforms (like the 2021 bill) occur first.

2. Judiciary and Legal Redress: While few cases from Arunachal reach higher courts, there has been at least one notable legal case: In 2020, the Itanagar Permanent Bench of the Gauhati High Court reportedly dealt with a case concerning an Adi woman's inheritance rights, where the court emphasized that customs cannot violate constitutional rights (the specifics were not widely published, but this hinted at judiciary's willingness to intervene for gender justice). Moreover, in cases of extreme violence (e.g., a high-profile domestic violence death or rape), formal law has taken its course with perpetrators prosecuted under IPC provisions. These

instances send a message that not all can be shielded by custom – **murder, rape, etc., have no sanction under any acceptable custom**. The National Commission for Women (NCW) and Arunachal's State Commission for Women have also been more active of late, conducting legal awareness camps in tribal districts to educate women on their rights to report domestic violence and claim maintenance, etc. Such awareness is slowly encouraging women to approach the police or courts rather than only the village council when serious violations occur.

3. Rise of Women's Organizations: A very promising development is the rise of indigenous women's organizations and self-help groups (SHGs). The **Arunachal Pradesh Women's Welfare Society (APWWS)**, established in 1979, has been a pioneer in advocating for women's rights. It was instrumental in pushing for the 2021 bill and has consistently campaigned against polygamy, child marriage, and drug abuse. APWWS and affiliated groups often act as mediators – for instance, resolving domestic disputes in favor of women when possible, or pressuring the administration in cases of injustice. At the community level, tribal women have formed welfare associations aligned to their ethnic group (e.g., **All Mishmi Women's Welfare Association (AMWWA)** for the Mishmi tribe, **Adi Women's Association**, etc.). These groups blend traditional solidarity with modern activism.

A concrete example: AMWWA has been actively involved in combating the opium menace in Lohit and Anjaw districts. Opium cultivation and addiction became rampant, affecting many families. **Women's groups like AMWWA stepped up** to organize awareness campaigns and encourage alternative livelihoods for farmers. As Behem Lap, an AMWWA leader, noted: simply telling people "don't grow opium" is not enough – they advocate for providing other income sources like horticulture so that families (many led by women) can wean off the lucrative opium trade. This is significant because it shows women influencing *community decision-making* in non-traditional spheres (economy, health). Similarly, SHGs across Arunachal (often supported by Arunachal State Rural Livelihoods Mission) have mobilized thousands of rural women to save money, start micro-businesses, and collectively voice issues. In Tezu block alone, as of 2023 there were 111 active women's SHGs with over 900 members. These SHGs not only empower women economically but also serve as platforms for civic education – many SHG members have gone on to contest Panchayat elections or join school management committees, thus entering decision-making roles. A study in *Rising Asia Journal* (Pandey et al. 2023) found that SHGs in Lohit district significantly improved women's confidence and participation: women in SHGs were more aware of government programs and more likely to speak up in Gram Sabha meetings than non-members.

4. Changing Attitudes and Grassroots Voices: Perhaps the most important change is the slow but steady shift in public attitudes among the younger generation of both women and men. As education spreads and people are exposed to wider social ideas, there is growing acknowledgment (even among male leaders) that some customs need reform. For instance, in 2019, a consortium of Arunachali NGOs (including women's groups) launched a campaign for "**One Man, One Wife**" to end polygamy, arguing that it was causing too much suffering for women. They invoked not just human rights but also religion and modernity to persuade villagers that monogamy should be the norm. The fact that these conversations are happening publicly is itself progress – issues once taboo (like a woman's right to inherit or to divorce an abusive husband) are now being discussed in the local media and community meetings. The state's leading newspaper, *The Arunachal Times*, frequently features op-eds by women scholars and lawyers (e.g., by Talin Rukbo, Jumni Siram, etc.) analyzing gender inequality in tribal society. These thought leaders are bridging the gap between tradition and modern law, explaining that giving women rights does not destroy culture but rather strengthens the community by ensuring justice. Youth from tribes like Apatani and Adi have also formed groups on social media advocating for the UCC and women's rights, indicating a generational change.

Finally, there is greater support from male allies – some tribal male politicians and intellectuals have started voicing that denying women equal rights is unjust. For example, Legal Development Society (a local NGO) organized workshops where village chiefs were sensitized about women's constitutional rights and many chiefs agreed to include women representatives informally in council meetings as observers. While symbolic, it's a step forward.

II. CONCLUSION

Women in Arunachal Pradesh occupy a socio-legal position shaped by the dynamic tension between **customary patriarchy** and **constitutional equality**. Traditionally marginalized in inheritance, decision-making, and public life, these women have long been accorded second-class status under the guise of cultural norms. Our review finds that while tribal society often celebrates women's cultural importance (as hardworking mothers and keepers of tradition), it simultaneously circumscribes their rights – denying them equal share in property, excluding them from governance, and tolerating practices like polygamy that undermine their dignity. The

“privileges” women purportedly enjoy (such as protection by the community) too often translate into control over their choices.

However, the landscape is changing. Education and awareness are spreading, and with them, women’s aspirations for equality are rising. **Legal reforms** are on the horizon, evidenced by the ambitious 2021 draft law that seeks to secure for Arunachali women the rights that most Indian women take for granted – the right to inheritance, monogamous marriage, maintenance, and a life free of discrimination. Equally important, **social reforms from within** are gaining momentum: women’s organizations and youth leaders are questioning inequitable customs and pushing for an interpretation of culture that is inclusive and just. The road ahead is undoubtedly challenging – changing deeply ingrained attitudes and laws in a culturally sensitive context will require persistent dialogue and empathy. It will also require the support of men and community elders, to ensure that reforms are seen not as outside “interference” but as part of the community’s own growth.

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