

PROPERTY INHERITANCE RIGHTS OF AO NAGA WOMEN

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PROPERTY INHERITANCE RIGHTS OF AO NAGA WOMEN

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Certificate

This is to certify that **Takolong Kichu**, a bonafide research scholar having enrolment No: MZU/Ph. D/1770 of 30.08.2021 attached to the Department of Sociology has completed his work for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D) in Sociology under my supervision and guidance on a research topic entitled '**Property Inheritance Rights of Ao Naga Women,**' for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology, Mizoram University, Aizawl. The work embodies a record of original investigation and no part of it has been submitted for any other degree in other universities.

On evaluation of all the formalities, I am pleased to forward the thesis for evaluation and further necessary action.

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DECLARATION
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I **TAKOLONG KICHU**, hereby declare that the subject matter of this thesis is the record of work done by me, that the contents of this thesis did not form basis of the award of any previous degree to me or to do the best of my knowledge to anybody else, and that the thesis has not been submitted by me for any research degree in any other University/Institute.

This is being submitted to the Mizoram University for the **Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology**.

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Glossary

<i>Ao</i>	: Ao Naga Tribe
<i>Aniing Noza</i>	: The children of the sky
<i>Kidong</i>	: Clan
<i>Moatsu</i>	: Community bonding festival
<i>Putu Menden</i>	: Village council
<i>Senmang</i>	: Inheritance
<i>Senso</i>	: Citizen
<i>Senso Mungdang</i>	: Village Citizen's Conference
<i>Sobaliba</i>	: Ao traditions, customs and ethical values
<i>Tebur Yimli</i>	: Patriarchy
<i>Tetsur Tanur</i>	: Women and minor Children
<i>Tsungremong</i>	: Pre-Harvest festival of Aos
<i>Watsu Mungdang</i>	: Ao Women's Conference

Chapter I

Introduction

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Understanding Tribe

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Chapter I

Introduction

1.0 Introduction

Property, in all its forms, is regarded and recognised as the primary asset, or key element, in determining and enhancing a person's socio-economic standing in all societies. Ownership and control of such properties enhance the lives of those who possess them. The right to inherit property not only impacts an individual's economic status but also their social standing and family dynamics. However, not only do men and women have different access to the properties, but women historically faced greater challenges to obtain equal inheritance rights due to firmly established cultural practices, legislative limits, and patriarchal norms. These barriers vary greatly across different regions and societies, reflecting diverse social, political, economic, and historical contexts.

Women's ownership of immovable property, particularly agricultural land, has become increasingly recognised in recent decades, both in academic research and among policymakers and practitioners, as a significant determinant of their economic and social status, physical security, and overall well-being for themselves and their families (Agarwal et al., 2021). Nevertheless, in most countries, full assessments of gender inequality in land ownership are still lacking. For example, whereas many countries have collected gender-disaggregated data, only 20 nations have recorded who owns the land by gender (FAO, 2013). Thirteen of these countries are in Sub-Saharan Africa, with only a few in Asia, including India, which is visibly absent.

Furthermore, as countries strive for gender equality in inheritance laws to foster poverty reduction, economic growth, and greater social resilience (World Bank, 2015), it is critical to track whether these laws have helped to close the gender gap in property ownership or have been hampered by regressive social norms. Although women can obtain land through various methods, including inheritance, gift, purchase, or government transfers,

inheritance is typically the most important, particularly in South Asia, where land (particularly agricultural land) is generally owned privately (Agarwal, 1994). This is especially true in India, where inheritance laws vary by religion, region, and community, with land being treated as a special type of property, and the shares or rights to it are defined not just by gender but also by the person's relationship to the deceased (Agarwal, 1994, 1995).

Even though reforms to encourage more equality in inheritance laws began shortly after India's independence, such as the passage of the Hindu Succession Act (HSA) of 1956 for Hindu women and other reforms among Christians and Parsis, the Hindu Succession Amendment Act of 2005 was the most significant. This legislation provided significant legal equality for Hindu women, who comprise 80% of Indian women, in all forms of property ownership, including agricultural land and common family properties (Agarwal, 2005). Women's metaphors in tribal communities are, however, overwhelmingly negative. Tribal societies in the Northeast, which are well-known for their distinct identities and customary laws, are frequently understood from a male perspective that denies women their inheritance rights. Patriarchal society's desire to preserve property within the family has prevented women from inheriting it (Basu, 1999).

This can be seen in the instance where women among the Nagas are governed by customary laws, and the prevalence of such laws prevents them from accessing property inheritance rights. The same goes with the Aos, who are a tribal community inhabiting the Mokokchung district of Nagaland. Here, women have no right to inherit ancestral lands held by their fathers, nor can they transfer the properties owing to the patriarchal system and customary laws. Thus, when it comes to property inheritance rights, gender discrimination is one of the most fundamental issues to deal with, where age-old practices govern the everyday lives of the people and define the social fabric of the society, which is gender discriminatory in nature.

Nonetheless, women are significant producers of food and goods all over the world, working in fields, factories, and home-based businesses. As a result, they are vital to the survival of their families, communities, and countries. Rural women are responsible for half of global food production, amounting to around 60 and 80 per cent of it in most developing nations (FAO, 2013). The United Nations, on the other hand, says that less than 20 per cent of agricultural landholders are women (UN Women, 2020). Land also remains the primary form of property in rural South Asia, significantly affecting the economic well-being, social status, and political power (Agarwal, 1994). Thus, improving women's property rights is not simply an issue of human rights and gender equality; it is also a basic premise that underpins economic progress for all. In this regard, equalising inheritance rights is a significant tool for women's empowerment, and more empirical research is needed to show that women's property ownership keeps them out of poverty or keeps them safe from destitution. With this context in mind, the present study aims to study the tribal Ao society in northeast India, focusing on how customary laws and patriarchal practices affect gender discrimination and property inheritance rights. This study tries to examine gender relations within cultural practices to understand how and why women remain trapped by traditional customs that restrict their access to property and economic empowerment, despite global efforts to promote gender equality. Thus, before proceeding further, there is a need to first understand the concepts.

Concepts, as defined by Chapin (1939), are basic ideas that involve abstract thinking. They serve as fundamental building blocks for understanding how we think and talk about different issues. These concepts are a network of interrelated ideas thoroughly explaining a phenomenon (Jabareen, 2009) and narrow the field under consideration (McGuire, 2012). Moreover, Miles and Huberman (1984) define a conceptual framework as the current version of the researcher's map of the territory under investigation. Framing the specification of terms, concepts, and definitions is essential for every scientific discourse

due to necessity and practical utility. As such, the key concepts relevant to the scope of this study are elucidated in the following headings.

1.1 Understanding Tribe

The concept ‘tribe’ is derived from the Latin term ‘tribus’, referring to the administrative divisions and voting units of ancient Rome (Cornell, 1995). Throughout colonial expansion, the term took on a very specific meaning, becoming a social unit and a typical life-organising form for people that was deemed more primitive by Euro-American colonists (Sneath, 2016). As described by various scholars, tribal societies exhibit unique organisational and livelihood patterns. Bose (1971) categorised tribes based on their means of livelihood, such as hunters and gatherers, animal herders, shifting farmers, and settled agriculturalists. Sahlins (1961) also defines a tribe as a segmental organisation of equivalent, unspecialised multifamily groups, each structurally identical and forming a collection of equal kin-group blocs. Similarly, Godelier (1977) describes the tribe as a “completely organised society,” a sentiment echoed by Beteille (1986), who emphasises the segmental system and clan-lineage structure typical of tribes.

Moreover, Beteille (1974), in his essay on Tribe and Peasantry, outlines four criteria for defining tribes in India: size, isolation, religion, and means of livelihood. Mandelbaum (1970) similarly notes that most tribal peoples in India reside in sparsely populated hilly or forested terrains. Geographical isolation and strong ethnic identity often characterise these communities (Corbridge, 1988). Tribal people tend to dwell in forests and hills, typically having a well-defined geographical territory and making a living by relying heavily on natural resources. They survive by hunting and gathering fruits, tubers, and edible roots. Tribal communities also have their own language and do not use any script. They communicate using their language and have their own customs, traditions, and culture (Fürer-Haimendorf, 1982).

Tribal political systems are also unique. Family and kinship ties maintain law and order, fostering a strong sense of belonging and identity (Kapur, 2018).

Kinship bonds facilitate joint tenancy and collective resource holding, such as land (Ratnagar, 2003), and Mandelbaum (1970) emphasises that in tribal life, kinship forms the principal societal link, with individual equality presumed among kinsmen. Men's dependence and subordination are minimised, with agnatic bonds forming the core social web, while affinal ties are less relevant. Lineages, or clans, are primary organisational units responsible for land ownership, defence, economic production, and consumption and ensuring equal rights among members (Mandelbaum, 1970).

Another feature of tribal societies is the communal land tenure system, which means that land rights are held by clan chiefs descended from the village's founders, who distribute land to the clans' households on a regular and temporary basis. Traditional tribal societies typically have a gender division of labour for daily tasks (Illich, 1982), and cultural norms strongly influence the organisation of sex roles within the tribe (Corbridge, 1998). Furthermore, despite the significant roles tribal women play in economic and non-economic spheres, including establishing and maintaining the family home (Bhasin, 2007), patriarchy often dictates their status. Customary practices frequently override legal policies meant to ensure gender equality in property rights, perpetuating disparities between men and women (Agarwal, 1994). Legal reforms struggle to penetrate these deeply rooted traditions, indicating the importance of culturally sensitive approaches to addressing gender inequality in tribal societies.

1.2 Gender as a Social Construct

The World Health Organisation defines the term 'gender' as the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities, and characteristics that society thinks are appropriate for men and women. Psychologist Robert Stoller first used the term 'sex' to identify biological features and 'gender' to identify the degree of femininity and masculinity a person expresses (Mikkola, 2008). The terms 'sex' and 'gender' are not synonymous. In English, physiological or bodily aspects are frequently referred to as 'sex', which relates to genitalia,

chromosomes, and physical attributes, whereas social aspects are referred to as 'gender' (Frohard-Dourlent et al., 2017; West & Zimmerman, 1987), including cultural meanings associated with behaviours, personalities, and expressions typically labelled as feminine or masculine attributes (Reisner et al., 2015).

Once a person is labelled as a member of a sex category, he or she is morally responsible for acting in the same manner as others in that category (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Gender is also a non-essential category that is repetitively performed depending on societal norms (Morgenroth & Ryan, 2018). This means that gender is not an inherent, fixed attribute of an individual. Unlike biological sex, which is based on physical characteristics, gender is considered socially constructed and fluid. Individuals continuously perform their gender through acts and behaviours that either adhere to or question cultural norms. This division of gender is 'culturally and historically distinctive, internally contradictory, and open to change' (Hegarty, Ansara, & Barker, 2018). Moreover, the sociology of gender focuses on these social processes that shape a person's gender, rather than biological factors (Westbrook & Schilt, 2014).

Lindqvist, Senden, and Renstrom (2021) also operationalised gender as comprising multiple aspects, which can be divided into four main categories: (a) physiological or bodily aspects (sex); (b) gender identity, or self-defined gender; (c) legal gender; and (d) social gender, in terms of norm-related behaviours and gender expressions. The terminology of gender in other terms is also referred to as 'man and woman' or 'feminine and masculine' (Ansara & Hegarty, 2014). However, it is most commonly addressed in social science research as 'male/female' (Westbrook & Saperstein, 2015). Thus, gender is the state of being male or female, and society defines and characterises all its members by gender.

However, the term 'gender' has increasingly taken on a social meaning, defining how men and women relate in society. The social meaning relates to the social aspects of one's biological sex. These features include gender-based division of labour, which assigns duties based on one's gender. Over time, the

term ‘gender’ has gradually evolved to relate to the social relationships between the sexes in society. It now encompasses the social characteristics linked with a person’s biological sex, such as gender-based division of labour, which assigns jobs depending on one’s gender. For instance, society often assigns cooking, cleaning, and other domestic tasks to women, placing them in the private sphere instead of the public. In contrast, the masculine gender is allocated to non-domestic activities, such as decision-making and breadwinning, which are part of the public sector (Forste & Fox, 2012). Today, gender refers to a self-defined identity that can be flexible or change with time and circumstance. Gender identity is consistent for some people throughout their lives and contexts, whereas it varies for others from one moment to the next or over time and context in daily life (Lindqvist, Senden, & Renstrom, 2021). Thus, instead, people now ask the question, ‘How do you currently identify?’ (Tate, Ledbetter, & Youssef, 2013).

These concepts of tribe and gender are essential for understanding human cultures since they both influence social structures, identities, and cultural norms. While tribes represent groups of people that share their heritage, language, and traditions, gender is a social construct that defines roles, behaviours, and expectations based on perceived distinctions between men and women. The following section explores the convergence of tribe and gender within a society.

1.3 Intersection of Tribe and Gender

The intersection of tribe and gender helps us understand how tribal identity and gender dynamics influence and are a part of each other in the context of tribal societies. Tribal identity encompasses a distinct cultural, social, and historical background that defines the community’s way of life, values, and traditions. In these societies, gender roles and duties are frequently determined by the individual’s gender, and by analysing this intersection, one can understand how cultural norms, kinship networks, and traditional behaviours influence men’s and women’s experiences and opportunities in distinct ways.

Tribal identity is deeply rooted in their history, culture, language, and social structure (Mandal & Mandal, 2020) and is a key element of the tribal society. It includes a unique set of values, beliefs, and customs that characterise the group's way of life. In these communities, gender roles are often determined by traditional norms and expectations, which specify responsibilities, actions, and social standing for men and women. Moreover, the distinct cultural and social settings of each tribal community further affect and complicate these roles when gender and tribe come together.

Another essential component of traditional customs in tribal societies is rituals and ceremonies. These occasions, which include religious rituals, harvest festivals, marriage ceremonies, and rites of passage, are essential to preserving social cohesiveness and cultural continuity (Klapp, 1959). They provide the community with an occasion to unite, celebrate, and reaffirm its common values and beliefs. But involvement in these rites is often strongly gendered, with men and women given different roles and obligations. In religious and ceremonial activities, men often take the lead, and female involvement is often restricted or limited to supporting roles, creating more value for men in society and restricting women's opportunities.

Kinship and marriage are also inextricably linked to gender hierarchies, and they play a role in women's subordination in tribal societies by influencing their responsibilities, rights, and status within their communities (Onsongo, 2006). The patrilineal descent system, in which descent and inheritance are traced through the male line, is common in many tribal groups. This implies that wealth, land, and property are normally passed down from father to son (Orisaremi, 2021), thereby preventing women from inheriting properties. Because of this, women frequently have restricted access to assets and financial resources, which reduces their ability to support themselves financially and increases their dependence on male family members. Consequently, the patrilineal system solidifies gender hierarchies.

Marriage practices in tribal societies further reinforce these gender hierarchies. Practices such as bride price or dowry are frequent, in which the groom's family pays or provides a present to the bride's family, and vice versa. While these behaviours vary greatly, they frequently perpetuate the perception of women as property or economic goods to be traded (Rastogi & Therly, 2006). In many parts of India, the emphasis on patriline implies that married daughters are only regarded as members of the household they marry into. Women bear offspring for the patriline into which they marry (Maharatna, 2000). This transactional vision of marriage weakens women's autonomy by putting them under the control and authority of their husbands and in-laws, and thereby, in many circumstances, a woman's worth is linked to her ability to marry successfully, reinforcing her subjugation within the family system.

Furthermore, in tribal societies, the division of labour based on gender is another important factor in maintaining gender hierarchies. Blackwood (1984) writes that gender roles in Native American tribes included a specific set of responsibilities. Most jobs required for the functioning of the tribes were classified as male or female tasks, and this traditional division of labour assigned women the functions of collecting, food preparation, child care, basket weaving, and clothing production, while males hunted, created weapons, and built canoes and dwellings. This assignment of separate jobs to each sex created a reciprocal system that ensured the sexes' interdependence. Chaudhary (2010) notes that in the tribal areas of Betul, Madhya Pradesh, tribal women are generally in charge of collecting and marketing firewood. They sell it, and whatever money they receive is promptly spent on necessities such as rice, pulses, edible oil, soap, detergent powder, tobacco, bidi, and so on. These sex and gender systems in society naturally promote imbalance, resulting in male dominance and female subordination and enforcing specific gender-appropriate behaviours (Ortner & Whitehead, 1981).

Another important domain where gender hierarchies appear is inheritance rights, where a prevalent custom in most tribal communities is the collective ownership and administration of land (Lavoie, 2017). The community or clan

frequently owns the land jointly, with certain parts set aside for farming and other purposes. This guarantees that all members have access to necessary resources, and this approach promotes a strong sense of shared accountability and community. Nevertheless, male elders usually hold the power to make decisions about land usage and management, which excludes women from these crucial discussions. Women's rights to inherit land and property are thus restricted or non-existent in many tribal societies due to customs, traditions, and norms (Mishra, 2021). The absence of inheritance intensifies their dependence on male relatives for financial support and diminishes their capacity for negotiation within the family and community.

Women's potential to become economically secure and independent is severely limited when they lack access to land and property, which maintains their status as inferiors. Thus, the status of tribal women is largely determined by their roles in society, which are primarily dictated by the system of descent. Families aim to pass down their property through this lineage, and family surnames are traced according to this system. This exclusion perpetuates gender hierarchies and restricts women's capacity to influence decisions that directly affect their livelihoods. However, it is imperative to acknowledge the diversity and resiliency found in tribal societies despite these pervasive challenges. Some tribal communities may adhere to more egalitarian customs, while others may not strictly conform to these hierarchical structures (Trivedi, 2007). The traditional practices encompass a wide array of cultural, social, and economic activities that are vital to their identity and way of life, as well as crucial for maintaining social cohesiveness and transmitting cultural traditions and values. Nevertheless, they also mirror and uphold the power structures and gender hierarchies that already exist. But at the same time, a large number of tribal women actively oppose and stand against the unfair gender norms, fighting for increased involvement, rights, and acknowledgement in their communities. Their attempts to obtain property rights, gain access to education, and take part in governance demonstrate how gender dynamics in tribal societies are dynamic and ever-changing.

The connection between tribe and gender is therefore an intricate and multidimensional issue, involving a wide range of social, cultural, political, and historical elements that shape how gender roles and identities are established and maintained within different tribal societies. Many societies view property inheritance to uphold economic stability and social continuity. However, the exclusion of women from these rights has often reinforced gender inequities, limiting their economic independence and perpetuating subordinate social positions. The issue of property inheritance is not just legal but also highly cultural, intertwining with gender, power, and tradition. The relationship becomes much more complicated within tribal societies, where customary laws and traditional practices frequently take precedence over formal legal systems.

The terms ‘tribe’ and ‘gender’ have been discussed and examined, as well as how they interact with each other in a tribal society, leading to the prevalence of inequality because of one’s gender, which is a social construct. In the following subheading, this chapter tries to understand the term ‘customary law’ and see how gender again interacts with these customary laws.

1.4 Gender and Customary Law

Customary law refers to a set of guidelines that a tribe uses to practise its culture and convey its views. It has been argued that customary laws originated in primitive communities based on morality shaped by cultural contexts, often to maintain society’s cohesion (Hinde, 2004). Indigenous tribal communities regard customary law as “intrinsic to their identity and culture”, making it a crucial component of their traditional customs and practices (Fernandes & Bharali, 2009). This continuity provided by customary law is essential for maintaining the identity of tribal communities (Cobo, 1986).

Bekker (1989) defines customary law as “a system of established rules that evolved from the people’s way of life and natural needs, with a general context of common knowledge, combined with specific instances that were retained in the memories of the chief, his counsellors, their sons, and their grandsons until

forgotten or until they became part of the immemorial rules.” Kuskowski (2024) also highlights that these customs stemmed from habitual practice before they became law. Customary laws are made up of certain values and ways of life. They are common knowledge for the people and have existed since the beginning of time, stored in memories and based on past events. These laws are frequently extremely oppressive and more favourable for men, serving as potent agents that influence and define the roles of men and women. Customary laws also regulate various aspects of community relations, including ownership rights over lands, forests, water bodies, and other natural resources. They also govern personal matters such as marriage, divorce, inheritance, and child custody (Singh, 1993; Von Benda-Beckmann, 2001).

In addition to regulating community relations issues like ownership rights over lands, forests, water bodies, and other natural resources, customary laws also regulate marriage, divorce, inheritance, child custody, and other personal matters (Singh 1993; Von Benda-Beckmann, 2001). Thus, customary law refers to the accepted pattern of conduct within a society, which encompasses taboos, practices, and usages, as well as processes such as social rituals, culture, public stance, and ethics. As a result, these norms regulate the family’s social, cultural, and religious facets, as well as the individual’s behavioural patterns (Visto, 2003).

In tribal societies, customary law is essential for shaping the social fabric, impacting all aspects of daily life and preserving social cohesiveness. However, the relationship between gender roles and these customary laws reveals a complex dynamic that frequently highlights substantial disparities and challenges. Intricate and significant interactions occur between gender and customary law, governing numerous facets of life, including marriage, inheritance, property rights, and social behaviours, and it is rife with gender roles and expectations, which have the power to both reflect and maintain gender hierarchies and disparities. This is especially true when it comes to land and inheritance rights.

Customary laws act as a potent instrument for defining gender roles and imposing acceptable roles of conduct, and they continue to shape women's social and economic standing (Agarwal, 1994; Krishna, 2005). Women have virtually no customary rights to land in many tribal societies, and these rights have significantly eroded over time (Agarwal, 1988). Nearly all tribal customary law, encompassing "people's beliefs, customs, social mores, norms, rites, and usages practised since time immemorial, is not always conducive to the interests of women" and is extremely restrictive to women when it comes to marriage and property (Nongbri, 1998).

The United States Country Reports on Human Rights Practices (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights & Labour, 2008) indicate that, despite women's equal civil rights under the law, sexual discrimination continues. Tribal organisations and customary courts uphold traditional laws, severely hampering women's property rights and economic opportunities. Customary law, commonly known as traditional tribal law, thus continues to restrict gender equality (Sabar, 2021).

Men retain guardianship rights over women and children and are considered the head of the household, reinforcing customary law's impact on women's property and personal rights. Cultural norms support and uphold men's dominance over productive resources, particularly land. Since inheritance is structured along the male line, women are further restricted from acquiring land ownership (Molokomme, 1994). Thus, despite their significant contributions to their families' economic activities, tribal women face considerable barriers to empowerment due to customary laws that restrict their equal rights to inheritance and property (Agarwal, 1994). Traditionally, women have not been represented in decision-making bodies, with tribal male elites opposing women's political rights almost universally. This patriarchal structure persists in contemporary tribal societies.

In the following section, this chapter further tries to understand the term 'patriarchy' and examine its persistence in contemporary tribal societies,

delving into the complex dynamics of patriarchy in modern tribal societies and highlighting the challenges it brings forward.

1.5 Patriarchy in Contemporary Tribal Society

‘Patriarchy’ in its traditional sense refers to the “dominance of fathers in the household” (Akgul, 2017). However, it does not only mean the “rule of fathers” but also encompasses the dominance of the husband, male bosses, and men in social institutions such as the socio-political and economic spheres of society (Kameri-Mbote, 2005). It is a system of sociocultural and legal relations in which males as a class hold authority over women. These power relations are socially constructed, not biological or natural creations, and this authority may manifest in social, political, economic, and ideological forms. The cultural aspect of patriarchy usually means the undervaluing of women’s contributions or accomplishments, while at the ideological level, women are considered biologically distinct yet inferior to men (Petersen, 1994).

Patriarchal structures have been prevalent in many tribal societies, shaping their social, cultural, and economic norms. These societies have traditionally been based on kinship and lineage systems, with male lines usually holding authority and property. Traditionally, men have been justified in their dominant status because they are perceived as the primary guardians and providers (Ampofo & Ampofo, 2021). Women, on the other hand, have traditionally been given domestic duties like taking care of the family and keeping the house in order (Forste & Fox, 2012). Customs, traditions, and beliefs frequently perpetuate these structures, limiting women’s rights and opportunities. Gender norms and expectations are so rigidly defined in contemporary tribal societies that, as Bhasin (2007) mentions, “men are expected to participate in economically or politically significant activities, dominating the public sector.” Therefore, despite being crucial, women’s contributions are usually underestimated, limited to household responsibilities, and excluded from decision-making processes, and they play submissive roles in social life.

Due to patriarchy, tribal women are frequently left out of decision-making processes that impact their lives, families, and communities. They might not be permitted to serve in leadership capacities or attend council meetings, which restricts their capacity to influence crucial matters like social roles, resource management, and land use, posing serious threats to women's empowerment and development (Meera, 2016). Additionally, tribal women may experience discrimination and emotional, physical, or sexual abuse, exacerbated by traditional norms and beliefs associated with patriarchy, which enforces traditional gender roles and expectations. Furthermore, patriarchy also refers to the form of male domination, indicating the extent to which women have historically been exploited and oppressed, particularly when it comes to access and control over a society's productive resources (Kameri-Mbote, 2005). Increased productivity led to higher surpluses and the accumulation of private property. Men began to amass wealth and passed it down to their descendants, establishing a patrilineal transaction system to ensure the patriarch's complete authority over property, resulting in the erosion of mothers' rights (Marx & Engels, 2004). Property transfers between fathers and sons thus became the accepted norm, reflecting exploitative and repressive relations, especially from a gender perspective. Ownership of property and land is essential to security and power, and because of patriarchy, women's inheritance rights may be restricted or non-existent, keeping them economically dependent on male kin. Thus, there is a general agreement, or "received wisdom", that customary social and political structures are almost inherently detrimental to women since they are rooted in patriarchal social, political, and economic bonds (Daley & Englert, 2010).

In the preceding sections, this introductory chapter examines various facets of tribal societies, such as their social structures, customs, and the pervasive presence of patriarchy. These elements intricately shape the roles and expectations within the tribal communities. The study now focusses on the critical analysis of gender and property inheritance. The following section thus examines how customary laws, societal norms, gender expectations, and

patriarchy affect women's rights to inheritance and property, emphasising the persistent obstacles and inequalities that women in tribal societies experience.

1.6 Gender and Property Inheritance

When it comes to gender and property ownership, Agarwal (1994) raised the question of "Who owns the property and also who controls it?" In tribal societies, property ownership and management are often dictated by enduring traditions and customs that differ significantly among tribes. In general, kinship relationships, gender roles, and lineage all influence property ownership and control. Moreover, in patrilineal societies, properties are typically owned by male members of the family, and inheritance is usually passed on to the sons from their fathers. Men control and manage the properties, and women have less or no say in them. Furthermore, land is often communally owned by the tribe or the different clans, and control of such properties is exercised collectively through the male members for the betterment of all based on the customs, traditions, and values upheld. Gender roles also play a significant role in this context, as only men possess the right to property and make the majority of decisions. Women are more restricted, as society has constructed different roles and expectations for men and women. Agarwal argued that the main variable determining the gender disparity in economic well-being, social standing, and empowerment is the difference between gender ownership and management of property.

Land ownership and control over resources are so deeply rooted in patriarchy that women rarely own property, have limited access, and have a minor role in decisions about its allocation and use. The consequences for women who do not own, control, or have access to land are severe, as in such tribal communities, agriculture and other land-based natural resources are the primary sources of income. Strengthening women's land and property rights has therefore increasingly been considered a key strategy for achieving several development goals, including eradicating poverty, since women's life

outcomes are greatly impeded by unequal access, use, and control of such properties (Feyertag et al., 2021).

Thus, when the question arises about who owns the property and whether men and women should have equal rights regarding the use, ownership, inheritance, sale, purchase, and bequest of land, the answer is not so simple. The solution is not straightforward. Indeed, equality ought to prevail for all, given that men and women share equal human rights. But to simply say yes for all communities and societies is not possible, as it would be going against the norm upheld by most tribal communities that individual rights do not matter as against the rights of the ancestral family or tribe when such properties are communally and collectively owned. Of course, equality is a basic right for all, but when it comes to such practices, it is also necessary to understand the reason behind the custom and the practice. One should question why the practice is that way. What is the reason behind the practice? And why are such rights not given to all? The practices may be influenced by social, cultural, economic, and political conditions, facilitated by gender norms, kinship relations, marriage, household structure, and the values that are attached to the land.

Unquestionably, the right to inherit such properties and control over them contributes to the economic stability and bargaining power of women within the household (Giovarelli, 2006). Individuals and household members heavily rely on their ability to own land for their economic development and well-being. Women can only gain control over land-based earnings through independent or joint ownership. If women lack formal property rights over the land, they may not be able to fully participate in decision-making or enjoy the economic benefits (Agarwal, 1994). However, such autonomy is dependent on the norms or customs governing the inheritance process and ownership. In addition, women's land rights within the marriage would offer them greater control over the distribution of assets and security if their husbands forsake them, get divorced, or pass away (Fafchamps & Quisumbing, 2002). Apart from the immediate financial gains associated with land ownership, property

rights can also empower women in their relationships with other members of their households, the community, and society at large (Giovarelli, 2006), enhancing their political participation, social position, decision-making, and involvement within the society (Pradhan et al., 2019). As such, property inheritance and the rights to it are governed by customs and traditions, and more often than not, women's rights to land and property are restricted or non-existent in many tribal societies (Kundal, 2023).

Expanding upon the discussion on gender and property inheritance, focus has been laid on understanding the specific practices and rights of women's inheritance globally, nationally, and locally. Examining the many circumstances in which these rights are shaped and contested is crucial, given the intricate interactions between gender roles, customs, and traditions that limit women's property rights, as seen in tribal societies. By taking on the international, regional, and local aspects of women's inheritance rights and customs, this study aims to better grasp and understand the reasons and practices behind property ownership and management.

1.6.1 Global overview

Across the world, women constitute less than 20 per cent of the world's landholders (UN, 2020), and in some regions, like North Africa and West Asia, this figure drops to below 5 per cent (FAO, 2023). Moreover, despite comprising about half of the agricultural workforce, women own only about one-fifth of all land globally, and on average, women are less than half as likely as men to own a house alone (UN Women, 2023). When it comes to access and control over resources, an FAO (2023) survey of 46 countries found that in 40 of them (87%), men had a larger share of ownership or secure rights over agricultural land compared to women. The complex interplay of customary practices, socio-cultural norms, and various legal reform initiatives shapes the situation. However, customary laws and traditional practices continue to restrict women's rights to property and ownership, despite the reforms and initiatives. Therefore, an attempt has been made to examine the

global patterns of women's inheritance rights and practices, starting from Asia to Africa and other regions, to understand how different societal practices and norms influence women's access to property.

In the Asian context, McCreery (1976) described women's property rights according to the Ch'ing Code and stated that "Chinese women had basically no property rights." Ch'u (1961), moreover, mentions that under the Ch'ing Code, only a man could hold the status of family head. The family's property belonged to the head, and no other member of the family could use or dispose of it without his agreement. As such, it can be known that Chinese women were barred from owning family property and land. According to a survey in 17 provinces by Landesa (2014), women's names in China were included on only 17 per cent of land contracts and 38 per cent of land certificates.

In Pakistan, Mumtaz and Nashirwani et al. (2013) noted that women have limited influence over land and productive resources. Even when women have the legal right to own and inherit property, patriarchal traditions become a barrier to women's rights, and this lack of property ownership results in the prevalence of poverty in rural Pakistan. Ahmad et al. (2012) also stated that although women in Pakistan have legal rights, they rarely use them, and Mehdi (2002) observed that women have been deprived of their portion in inheritance even when they are entitled, especially in the case of land, where their full claim is frequently disregarded.

In the case of Sri Lanka, Gunasekera (2021) writes that multiple laws regulate land inheritance and ownership patterns, with the prevalence of bilateral inheritance practised to keep the land within the household or the community. Under the multiple laws, Guneratne (2006) writes that, in terms of the general law, half of the intestate property was given to the spouse, and the other half was divided equally among the children. All the citizens of Sri Lanka fall under this general law, besides the ones who practice the other three customary laws: Kandyan Law, Tesavalamai Law, and Muslim Law. Kandyan Law was administered solely for the purpose of securing household property within the

family, which is bilateral, and when a husband dies, his spouse retains control and manages the landed property (Risseeuw, 1988). Tesavalami law is bilateral as well, with the sons inheriting the father's property and the dowry as inheritance for the daughters out of the mother's property (Tambiah, 2000). However, Fonseka and Raheen (2011) note that the husband had complete authority over the wife's immovable property. Under Muslim law, Yalman (1963) writes that concerning inheritance, the Hanafi school of intestate inheritance is practiced, and Goonesekere (1990) says that, to a certain extent, women's inheritance rights to ancestral immovable property are recognised, yet they are unequal to those of men. As a result, Sri Lanka is renowned for having favourable conditions for women in terms of matrilineal and bilateral inheritance practices and property rights, as pointed out by Agarwal (1994) and Bulankulame (2006). However, inheritance is still the most common means to attain land in South Asia (Dube, 1997), but traditional norms and practices in inheritance and land allocation favour men over women (Kelkar, 2014).

Bennett (1981) observed that, despite efforts to remove legal barriers women face, laws around the world continue to favour men in terms of ownership and are said to be stricter in developing countries, which are mostly embodied in customary laws. Customary laws and religious practices around the world prohibit women from inheriting or succeeding to certain types of properties. Such restrictions can be seen in countries that follow Islamic law, such as Iran, where a wife did not get a share of her husband's property (Sadjadi & Hedin-Pourghasemi, 1976). Maina et al. (1976) stated that in Kenya, the Law of Succession Act (1972), which provides equality of inheritance for both sexes, exempts agricultural land and crops from the provision, and property is regulated through the family laws of succession, which often prohibit women from inheriting land or livestock.

For Richardson (2004), the recurring rejection of a woman's right to inherit land and other belongings in Sub-Saharan Africa is a substantial obstacle in achieving the rights of women. The customary laws that regulate land, housing, and their transfer among households have predominantly excluded

girls from property and inheritance. In Botswana, Molokomme (1991) discussed that the majority of the belongings possessed or received with the aid of the spouse at some stage in their marriage belong to the husband and descend to the eldest son upon his father's death, which was a cornerstone of the traditional system. In Zambia, notwithstanding the significance of matrilineal women in defining the family and ancestry, men wield real authority in matrilineal cultures just as in patrilineal civilisations, and when a man dies, his nephews (sons of sisters) are his primary heirs (Poewe, 1981). While Awusabo-Asare (1990) mentions that when a person dies in Ghana, all of his self-earned assets (which commonly consist of belongings gained together along with his wife's assistance and work) belong to his lineage and are dispersed in line with customary law. In Uganda, Khadiagala (2002) states that restricting property rights to women is a new development in the country's legal and social history. He writes that when Uganda sank into political and economic upheaval in the 1970s, the courts changed toward a more authoritarian and patriarchal perspective of family and society, depriving women of their power and autonomy, and that legal property rights for women plummeted.

This global landscape of women's property rights highlights that women face persistent barriers to their property rights and the prevalence of conflict between statutory laws and customary practices, with traditional norms and practices favouring men over women when it comes to property ownership and its control. The next subheading focuses on examining the Indian scenario.

1.6.2 Indian Scenario

In India, 66.7 per cent of men own property, but only 40.3 per cent of women own it jointly with their husbands. The reality of financial independence is even worse, with only 20.5 per cent of women owning their own house and only 10.6 per cent owning land alone (NFHS, 2021). The ownership and inheritance practices reflect the country's complex diversity in terms of religion, geography, tribal population and customary practices that come with

it. India is characterised by stark gender disparities, with significant regional variations in women's status. The Indian family organisation is discriminatory against women in general, as India has a patriarchal, patrilocal, and patrilineal family system that values men's dominance and women's subordination. Under Indian inheritance laws, shares and rights are defined not just by gender but also by the individual's relationship to the deceased (Agarwal, 1994, 1995). These laws differ depending on religion, area, and type of property, with land being recognised as a special type.

Sharma (2024) stated that the evolution of property rights for Hindu women has transformed from traditional limitations to modern gender equality, greatly influenced by customs, colonial rule, and key legislative changes. In the beginning, ancient texts like the Manusmriti and traditions such as the Mitakshara system favoured males and constrained women's rights. The British introduced new legal concepts, which led to legislation such as the Hindu Widows Remarriage Act of 1856 and the Hindu Women's Rights to Property Act of 1937, progressively improving women's status. This transformative Hindu Succession Act of 1956, and especially the significant amendment in 2005, ended the male dominance, granting daughters equal coparcenary rights at birth in ancestral property just like sons.

The Hindu Succession Act of 1956 governs the property rights of Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, and Jains. Christians are governed by the Indian Succession Act of 1925. However, neither the Shia nor the Sunni Muslims have codified their property rights (Agnes, 2011). On the other hand, the laws and traditions of the different tribes continue to govern tribal women of different faiths and states in India. As such, in Uttarakhand, as per the social customs, women own or control little of the privately held land, and their rights to forests are mediated by the male head of the household (Sarin, 2003).

Witch hunting in the patrilineal Adivasi communities of Jharkhand is also seen as a byproduct of the fight to limit women's land rights and as an effort by men to eliminate widows' property rights (Kelkar & Nathan, 1993). Numerous

surveys and research also concluded that the fundamental economic goal of witch-hunting was the destruction of widows' life interests in their land (Parashar & Dhanda, 2009). Women's relationship to their kinship group in the Santal community of Jharkhand is thus ambiguous and serves as both a means of resource staking claims and a source of deprivation and suppression, particularly in light of the shortcomings of formal state mechanisms (Rao, 2005). Saboo (2019) also wrote that among the Munda tribe in Jharkhand, despite the land being a valuable asset to a family, women are barred from owning it because of patriarchal customs and traditions, which influence patterns of succession and possession of land or other assets. She also noted that a majority of Munda women accepted the fact that inheritance rights would empower them but didn't want to claim them or care about them.

The Adivasi communities in Gujarat follow customary land ownership norms, often distributing land among family members and registering it in the male's name (Patel, 2025). In order to acquire land rights, women frequently face torture, humiliation, and mental and physical assault. Kashyup and Chhodan (2023) also stated that customary laws generally limit Adivasi women's inheritance rights, leaving them with no ownership rights over their land. In the case of Santhal women in South Bihar, they are regarded as objects or property to be passed down from father to son. As a result, women have no right to their father's or husband's property, whether movable or immovable (Patel, 2025). For the tribal women of Bhils in Rajasthan, Mathur (2016) found that persistent gender inequality is prevalent when it comes to land ownership and control, with patriarchy and socio-cultural practices perpetuating women's subordination. Widows were also accused of being witches (dayans) by their relatives for grabbing their property.

Xaxa's (2004) study of women and gender in Indian tribes highlighted a significant shift from previous ethnographic accounts that typically depicted women as having a relatively improved status, including access to property and resources, to contemporary gender studies that reveal systemic disadvantages rooted in customary law. The shift from communal to individual property,

accelerated by colonial and post-independence governmental policies, is considered a critical aspect in the establishment of patriarchy and men's effective struggle to exclude women from land ownership. However, there exist exceptions, such as the matrilineal Khasis and Jaintias, where women continue to hold land ownership.

Thus, despite major legislative reforms like the Hindu Succession Act and its amendment in 2005, property rights for tribal women in India are still restricted by patriarchal norms and socio-cultural practices. The next section focuses on the inheritance practices in Northeast India.

1.6.3 Northeast Indian Practices

Hnuni (2001), in his work, writes that the tribal societies of Northeast India, which comprises eight states: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura, are mostly patrilineal except in Meghalaya. Hnuni observed that women in such patrilineal societies do not have the right of ownership or inheritance of property either in their parental or marital homes. The traditional practice bypasses women in matters of inheritance, favouring the eldest or youngest son and ignoring mothers or daughters. Furthermore, in the absence of sons, the existence of daughters and a mother is ignored, and the property is inherited by the next male kin of the husband, even though a mother contributed to it (Hnuni, 2001).

Zehol (2010) further asserts that the role of women in Northeastern societies in social and domestic matters is determined by their capacity to participate in the production process. Yet, in spite of it, they are denied property inheritance. There is still a lack of an objective and scientific interpretation of culture from women's perspectives, and the customary laws of various tribes favour men with patriarchal values. Boungpui (2014), based on secondary sources, also looked at the gender relations in the socio-economic life of the tribals in northeast India. She stated that the different roles assigned to men and women are socially and culturally determined and influenced by traditional practices, institutions, customs, and beliefs, with the patterns of gender socialisation in

the region being deeply rooted and shaped by patriarchy. Moreover, women were not only subordinates to men, but political, social, and cultural institutions, by and large, are controlled by men, with customary laws and practices reigning high.

Customary laws thereby play a dominant role among the tribals in Northeast India. Ekka (2011) writes that Schedule V of the Indian Constitution mandates the acceptance of customary law, even if it is not codified. Furthermore, Scheduled Tribes are excluded from the Hindu Succession Act until the Central Government directs differently, and as such, the Scheduled Tribes are exempted from both the Hindu Succession Act and the Indian Succession Act. Accordingly, Adelman and Peterman (2014) noted that gender inequality in property ownership among the tribals in the northeast is frequently interpreted through customary laws from a patriarchal socio-cultural lens, with women being disadvantaged on the receiving end.

These rules, traditions, and customs of indigenous and local communities, known as ways of life or customary laws, regulate property inheritance practices. Mizo women are severely discriminated against in terms of property inheritance, states Lalhriatpuii (2010), because they were never given rights over landed property. The youngest son always inherited everything, and when the family did not have a son, the family property, including the ancestral home, was passed on to the father's nephew. However, after the new Mizo Marriage, Divorce and Inheritance Act (2014) came into force, things have been better for Mizo women. From divorce procedures to inheritance of family (ancestral) property, this Act has empowered, elevated, and enhanced the position of women in various ways. A woman now has an honourable role in her paternal or ancestral property, and she is also entitled to inherit her father's property, both socially and monetarily. In the absence of a son, the Act guarantees rights of inheritance of the husband's property by the wife and daughters, which was not the case before Lalzikpuii (2019).

In Tripura, Barooah (2009) goes on to argue that the males are the absolute owners of family property, whether self-acquired or inherited in Tripuri customary laws, and have the authority to dispose of the property. Shil and Jangir (2021) also noted that men are the absolute owners and property dissolves from the father to the son. Moreover, they noted that Tripuri women often give up their inheritance in favour of their brothers to be considered 'good sisters'. Owning land is considered a basic human right that provides economic and social security and stronger bargaining power. However, different studies consistently point to the gender bias in land rights. This instance is similar to the case of women's rights over land in Assam. Hazarika and Sita (2020) state that among the Bodo community of Assam, the construction of societal norms and an individual's rights over landed property and its inheritance is generally determined by kinship and affinal ideologies of the Bodo community. However, these norms frequently discriminate based on gender, depriving women of their rights. Moreover, single, widowed, and separated women are the ones who are most affected, as the patriarchal ideology of the Bodos considers women passive, dependent, and secondary subjects, and accordingly, gendered norms are constructed. Similar patterns of exclusion are found across Assam, with patriarchy and societal norms marginalising women in the society (Nayak & Mahanta, 2012).

In terms of the Kuki community, Sitlhou (2015) studied the interplay between gender, religion, and politics and stated that patriarchy influences women's relationship with land. Ancestral land is linked to the identity and sense of community among the people, and daughters or women cannot inherit ancestral landed property as per the traditional customary law. Kuki women also do not have any voice in decision-making when it comes to politics and land, and religious practices have adapted to suit the patriarchal context that exists, indirectly supporting the gender-biased inheritance customs that deprive women. Among the tribal communities in Arunachal, Basar (2023) writes that the traditional property and succession practices are also deeply rooted in patriarchal customs. Property is classified into movable property, such as

traditional jewellery, objects and animals, and immovable property like land, and under the customary law of the Arunachal tribes, women do not have any rights to the immovable properties, and males are the only heirs to it.

It's fascinating to note that matrilineal societies do not depict things much differently. Even in matrilineal societies, where women held nominal ownership rights to property (including land), men frequently held both effective control and legal authority over it (Wahlang, 2015). According to Nongbri (1997), sons generally have no right to this ancestral property, except in rare instances where a family has no female issue. She also asserts that the customary laws of the tribe do not always advance the welfare of women, and the state durbars (councils) and traditional village councils, which oversee public administration and the management of their land and forests, are largely inaccessible to women of the Khasi and Jaintia communities (Nongbri, 2003). The maternal uncle (U Kni) plays a more significant role and holds equal control over the property (Wahlang, 2015). Thus, despite being a matrilineal society, men often hold the real power when it really matters.

Patriarchal values predominantly shape women's inheritance rights across Northeast India, similar to the rest of the country and the world, resulting in women having minimal inheritance rights. However, while state reforms like the Mizo Act of 2014 exist, in reality, customary laws, societal norms and cultural practices dominate women's property and inheritance rights. Having established this, the focus of the study now comes down to the inheritance practice and the rights of women in Naga society.

1.6.4 Inheritance Practices in Naga Society

Land occupies the most important position with respect to every tribe in Naga society. Each tribe, clan, and village in Naga society has its own lands and is homogenous, self-sustaining, and independent (Talitemjen & Lanunungsang, 2005). Men dominated Naga society both socially and politically because of the existing patriarchal social structure, which affected the rights and status of women. Even though women were respected and treated well, their position

relating to the law of inheritance and property was lower than men, and they could not inherit the ancestral or communal lands of the village (Talitemjen & Lanunungsang, 2005). Women faced significant restrictions regarding land ownership. They are not entitled to claim ownership of the land she works on, the house she resides in, or even her kitchen garden. Daughters cannot inherit immovable or ancestral property. Sharma (2016) writes that women in Nagaland are battling a two-pronged war: participation in government institutions and inheritance rights. Moreover, even though there are numerous dissimilarities between the diverse Naga tribes, each tribe is patriarchal in nature, and the inheritances of landed properties are mainly confined to the male line of the family (Horam & Haokip, 2022).

In the Angami tribe of Nagaland, clans own the land, and men have the right to inherit it because descent is traced through the male line (Singh, 1994). Women cannot inherit clan land or own ancestral property. Similarly, in the Yimkhiung Naga tribe, only male heirs possess the right to inherit land and immovable property (Lily & Sharma, 2024). The Zeliangrong tribe also exhibits a pronounced patriarchal structure. Zeliang women, like other Naga tribes, are not entitled to own or hold any sort of ancestral land, as they are considered outsiders. This concept is rooted in the belief that after she marries, she would be considered a part of her husband's family and community, making her an outsider (Jangmei, 2022). The Sumi Naga tribe follows a comparable pattern, with the male members being more advantageous than the women in terms of inheriting and owning property (Swu, 2022). Among the Lotha tribe, women had less say when it came to property inheritance, with no share at all for the daughters and minimal influence over property-related decisions (Ezung & Ngullie, 2024).

This systematic gender bias in tribal Naga society is perpetuated by customary laws, manifested through customary practices, folklore, local sayings and local proverbs (Longkoi, 2023). Men have held power and authority in decision-making processes, which resulted in the marginalisation of women, limiting their participation in important matters in Naga society (Dhar & Nath, 2025).

Consequently, Naga women have to bargain and negotiate on all fronts with no property rights and limited decision-making. This is due to the strong inclination towards patriarchy in the traditions and customs of the people of Nagaland. Women do not enjoy the same status as men, and these customs and practices prevail because the customary laws are protected and endorsed by Article 371A of the Indian Constitution (Dhanya & Jayakrishnan, 2024). These customary laws and traditions for the Nagas are the basis for all decision-making, governance, administration, and management of land, resources, and social relationships (Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law & Development, 2022). As such, the intersection of tradition and customary law continues to uphold gender inequality in matters of land and property rights in Naga society.

1.7 Traditional Inheritance Practice of the Ao Naga Society

Like many other Naga tribes, the Aos follow a patriarchal social structure that shapes the rules, customs, and practices of the society. These practices are frequently entwined with the customary laws, and the Aos consider them the accepted moral, religious, and social codes that govern the lives of the people and are transmitted orally from one generation to the next. Every Ao village, according to Jamir (2012), is independent, has its own jurisdiction, and operates as a republic. In terms of the political system and village administration, Ao villages are governed by a ruling body called the Putu Menden (Village Council). This governing body consists of a group of men from different clans, who come together to exercise legislative, executive and judicial powers. Members of the clan, who are men, participate in the village administration, while women are excluded from governance and the political structure; they also cannot be appointed to the Putu Menden (Talitemjen & Lanunungsang, 2005). As such, an Ao woman cannot participate in the discussion of the general public or the mass meeting of the village citizens (Senso Mungdang). Toshimenla Jamir (2015) stated that women are thereby known as outsiders (Bendanger), as society treats individuals who do not own traditional land as ‘bona fide’ or ‘full citizens’ of the village. This notion

implies that the identity of an Ao woman is of less importance to the village and the clan than that of a man, thereby giving them a secondary status. Because of this, Jamir (2012) writes that in terms of inheritance, an Ao woman cannot inherit land and other immovable properties, nor is she liable for any debt from her ancestors.

Nonetheless, Bendangkokba (2019) writes that landed property is inherited only through the father's line, and this practice has been consistent without any impediment or change in the Ao society. The Ao customary law classifies property into two heads: ancestral property, or clan property, and personal property, or self-acquired property. Ancestral or clan property consists of ancestral common land, clan land and family land. On the other hand, personal property encompasses both movable and immovable self-acquired properties. Men manage clan properties, and inheritance is always in the men's and the clan's lineage. These rules of inheritance maintain male exclusivity by granting men ownership rights over landed properties, meaning that an Ao male inherits property from his father, grandfather, and so forth, which is referred to as inheritance (Senmang).

In the Ao Naga Social Life, the family is the smallest unit of the clan, which is patriarchal, and the Aos are an exogamous group of people, with the practice of intermarriage among different clans in the village. Because of this inter-clan marriage, women are excluded from owning or inheriting ancestral property (Jamir, 2012). By barring women from inheriting ancestral properties, Longchar (2002) states that it ensures the property remains within the clan. Moreover, Longchar and Kinny (2018) also noted that since married daughters are considered part of their husband's clan, this further justifies their exclusion from property inheritance. Toshi (2018) further says that the Ao society refers to women as *tetsür-tanur* (perceiving women as the same as minor children), lacking the authority or being unfit to engage in property-related discussions.

Thus, the fundamental nature of the traditional inheritance practice, as per the Ao customary law, is the prevalence and continuation of inheritance through

the male bloodline (Alinger, 2024). Furthermore, a man cannot bequeath his property to anyone outside his family or clan, nor can he leave his land to his daughters (Longchar, 2002). A woman could only inherit personal items, like clothes and jewellery (Jathy, 2020). Therefore, an Ao woman cannot inherit ancestral or clan land because customary law and traditions restrict this practice. Men enjoy the inheritance and property rights, and since women experience the limitations and restrictions, their social and economic standing in society is impacted by this discrimination.

However, despite the prevalence of discriminatory customs, many communities, including the Ao Nagas, continue to uphold traditional inheritance practices, which are integral to their cultural identity and supported by long-standing traditions, accepted social norms, and customary laws. It is thereby necessary to recognise the cultural legitimacy of the practice and examine why the inheritance practice is the way it is and how Ao women who are on the receiving end of this discrimination feel about the prevailing inheritance practice.

1.7 Overview and Statement of the Problem

The marginalisation of women in matters of property inheritance is deeply rooted in historical, cultural, and legal structures, where ownership and control over property are intertwined with patriarchal norms and customary practices. In many countries, including India, this discrimination against women in property ownership and inheritance rights is still evident, despite international and statutory reforms that promote gender equality. Such issues of women being excluded from inheritance rights are often prevalent in patriarchal societies, intricately structured to support male dominance and hierarchy.

In tribal communities, the intersection of gender, customary law and patriarchy creates a social order that profoundly affects women's rights to inherit property. As a social construct, gender prescribes specific roles, actions, and expectations that often lead to an imbalance of power because it favours men over women, who are relegated to subordinate positions in society. Customary

laws, which are perceived as integral to tribal identity and culture, tend to perpetuate these gender disparities by limiting women's participation in governance, decision-making, and property ownership. Patriarchal norms further exacerbate this situation in tribal communities like Northeast India, where the social structures are mostly patriarchal.

This issue is clearly seen in the case of the Ao Naga tribe of Nagaland. Customary laws tightly control property inheritance practices, typically excluding women from inheriting ancestral and immovable properties. This perpetuates Ao women's economic and social subordination, limiting their opportunities to assert their rights or question the traditional inheritance system that has been handed down and practiced in society. Thus, the central problem addressed in this study concerns the "Property Inheritance Rights of Ao Naga Women."

This study looks at the intricate inheritance practice of the Ao Nagas to understand how the interaction of gender norms, customary laws, and socio-cultural factors collectively shape women's access to and control over property. It seeks to identify the specific obstacles women face in asserting their rights to inheritance and the broader implications that these practices have on their social and economic empowerment. Moreover, focus is laid on examining the thoughts and perspectives of Ao women on the prevailing inheritance practice in terms of continuation of tradition or advocating for change. By engaging with the lived experiences and viewpoints of local Ao women, the study aspires to contribute to the ongoing global conversation on gender equality and property rights.

At the same time, this study approaches the issue with cultural sensitivity to understand the historical and social contexts that have shaped the inheritance practices of Ao Naga society rather than challenging them. By respecting and acknowledging the cultural significance of the tradition, the primary objective is to understand the underlying socio-cultural logic behind the traditional

inheritance practice of Ao society, which maintains and preserves the cultural heritage and identity of the Ao community.

The next chapter attempts a review of the available literature, duly classified into theoretical, thematic, and methodological headings.

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Chapter II

Review of literature

2.0 Introduction

Before beginning the study, it is essential to review relevant scholarly sources on the chosen topic and to summarise the writings and arguments presented by other scholars. These will help conceptualise the thematic areas and understand the study from a broader perspective, allowing for an overview of current knowledge. This process enables the identification of relevant theories and methods used to reach conclusions, as well as the location of research gaps in existing studies. This is the meaning and purpose of a review of the literature. Accordingly, the available literature has been reviewed and presented under three heads: theoretical perspectives, methodological reviews, and thematic reviews.

2.1 Theoretical perspectives

The present study is examined from various theoretical perspectives. The theoretical perspectives, or a theory, are time-tested and verified structural frameworks, explanations, or tools. Theoretical frameworks help one understand the overall theme and how family, descent, and kinship function and interact regarding women's property inheritance, which can lead to both conflict and social exchange, while also allowing us to examine women's property inheritance rights from a human rights perspective.

2.1.1 Gender Theory of Inheritance: Agarwal (1994) explores the crucial relationship between gender inequities and the right to own property, emphasising the significance of land rights for women living in rural areas. She writes that a woman's gender affects her rights through a complex combination of legal, cultural, economic, and social factors that often disadvantage her in the context of land ownership and control. It is her opinion that women need the rights to improve their welfare, enhance efficiency, leading to economic returns, promote equality, and foster empowerment. She emphasised the need

for collective action and targeted policies to bridge the gap between legal rights and actual ownership.

Hacker (2010) writes that gender is extremely significant in terms of personal, familial, societal, and legal matters because of its relevance in inheritance and wealth distribution and family relationships. In her work, Hacker also demonstrated that traditional patriarchal traditions still exist and limit women's inheritance rights even in the West, where inheritance is a unique economic environment in which women have privilege, power, and control. Women in the West face fewer restrictions and are better off compared to women in the rest of the world, even though there still exist traditional and patriarchal traditions in their inheritance practices.

Rao (2011) examines the complex association between gender and land rights in India and highlights that a woman's gender significantly affects her rights because of socio-cultural norms and perceptions, which reinforce gender biases and often deny women their rights. This, in turn, hinders the legal provisions aimed at ensuring women's rights to land because societal norms prioritise male ownership and control over it. She emphasised that targeted policies and community engagement can address the bias and inequality.

Zhllima et al. (2023) investigated gender disparities in land ownership and inheritance in Albania acquired either through marriage or patriarchal inheritance and found that while the official legal system is contemporary, it coexists with traditional informal rules that classify women as second-class citizens, thereby encountering strict resistance from the statutory laws. The authors also presented the patterns of gendered access to land and suggested that it has deep origins in Albanian history, in a profoundly patriarchal society that has evolved over centuries. Finally, they assert that most land-rights institutions will likely stay informal for the foreseeable future, because culture and tradition are as significant as, if not more important than, legal frameworks around land ownership and inheritance.

2.1.2 Descent and Kinship Theory: Descent theory, also known as lineage theory, proposes that kinship serves as intergenerational continuity by maintaining descent links through either or both parents and is applied to social structures such as the relationship between blood and soil, kinship and territory, family and clan, and studies how rights, responsibilities, status, and property are passed down from one generation to the next. Fortes and Evans (1940) are the pioneers who recognised various principal lines of descent groups, especially multilateral matrilineal and patrilineal kinship systems and the linkages between them. Maine (1861) and Morgan (1877) also constructed models in which cultural evolution was driven by a shift from status to contractual forms of organisation and from corporate to individual forms of property ownership. Traditional societies achieved their objectives by prioritising kinship relationships over property ownership.

In his work *Ancient Law* (1861), Maine formulates that the earliest form of kinship organisation was “patriarchal despotism”, in which society was made up of a collection of families, each ruled by the eldest surviving male. He also discussed how these families came together to form aggregations when the father died and the sons remained together, forming extended kinship ties and a broader polity that formed the foundation of societies and where attachment to territory created rivalry among blood ties much later.

In *Ancient Society* Morgan (1877) attempted to connect the evolution of kinship institutions to technological advancements and property forms; he proposed a model in which the early stages of kinship organisation were linked to low levels of technology and subsistence methods, such as hunting, gathering, or fishing. In these early stages of human evolution, there was no ownership of property; it was only later, with the development of pastoral and settled agriculture and, more importantly, the greater investments of time and energy that these activities required, that a vested interest in owning the products of labour, such as herds or cultivated land, arose. A man would also want to pass such products down to his children, so knowing who those children were became more important. As a result, men attempted to exert

more control over women, causing humanity to progress through stages of primitive promiscuity, group marriage, matriarchy, patriarchy, and polygamy before finally arriving at monogamy.

Bynder (1969) writes that Durkheim considered the family to be one of the most important social institutions and analysed the conjugal family as a system involving the kin, spouses, children and the state, focusing on their relationship with one another in terms of specific intervention in kin relationships, as well as in inheritance provisions (Durkheim, 1888, as cited in Lamanna, 2002). Durkheim (1957) also linked the clan-family and subsequent kin-based family forms to property assets owned by the family as a whole, where the significance of property was due to its sacral character as a symbol of the family, rather than its agricultural use. Bynder, quoting Durkheim's (1957), further writes that property dominated personal life in traditional society, and individual desires and ambitions were pushed aside in favour of a symbolic and economic attachment to land and family property. In this, the historic struggle of the conjugal family to free itself from kin dominance is reflected in the tension between spouses and kin as heirs. Durkheim's fascination with inheritance is consistent with his methodological commitment to law as an objective indicator of social phenomena (Durkheim, 1956), and he believed that inheritance would be completely abolished in the future, which has not been the case.

Thus, these kin relationships enable the transfer of status and property from one generation to the next within an effective social group. Descent serves as a means for an individual to establish rights, duties, privileges, or status in relation to another person, who may be connected to them either as an ancestor or through a shared common ancestor, thereby providing practical value. Thus, descent specifically influences rights to succession, inheritance, or residence that follow familial lines.

Alliance Theory: Alliance theory is rooted in the work of Claude Levi-Strauss (1969), focusing on the social structures and relationships formed through

marriage and kinship. The theory postulates that marriage is more than just a personal or familial arrangement; it is also a way for diverse groups to form alliances, which is necessary for social cohesiveness and resource sharing among families and clans, frequently involving complicated systems of reciprocity. Levi-Strauss also proposed the concept of generalised exchange in his theory, which refers to the exchange of women (or other resources) in a cycle that demands confidence and speculation among the parties involved.

Brown and Sawayan (1977) contend that alliance theory emphasises the interactions and connections built through marriage and the exchange of women between groups. They point out that alliance theory differs from descent theory, which stresses lineage and the principles controlling kinship based on ancestry. Unlike descent theory, which often examines marriage negatively (i.e., focusing on whom one should not marry), alliance theory takes a positive approach by emphasising who is assigned to provide wives and the resulting affinal ties, thereby allowing for a more profound understanding of the meanings and beliefs surrounding marriage and kinship. Brown and Sawayan also included the concept of segmentary opposition, stating that social groups may align against external threats, demonstrating how alliances can shift depending on social dynamics and conflicts.

Read (2018) argues that the patterns of links formed by marriage are crucial to the structure and coherence of interconnected social groups. He points out that marriage is more than just an individual choice; it is also a significant means for uniting social groups. He also underlines the importance of reciprocal relationships in marriage, in which groups trade women, resulting in kinship categories such as wife givers and wife receivers, which are necessary for preserving alliances and social relationships among various groups.

Alliance theory thus offers a framework for understanding how marriage and kinship function as mechanisms for establishing and maintaining social relationships, highlighting the significance of transactions, trust, and the underlying structures that control these interactions.

2.1.3 Conflict Perspective: Family conflicts, for the conflict theorist, are the result of social groups deprived of material resources trying to free themselves by remedying injustice. The *Origin of Family, Private Property, and State* by Frederick Engels, published in 1884, is the benign beginning of family conflict theory (Shornack, 1987). Engels, citing Johann Bachofen and Lewis Henry Morgan's theories, claimed that the first phase of family development, sexual promiscuity, was free from jealousy and incest (Engels, 1942). The consanguine family arose as a result of the prohibition of intergenerational mating. Later, the prohibition of brother-sister mating led to group marriage, where "mother right" or matriarchy and matrilineage prevailed. However, men began to concentrate wealth in their hands when private property replaced common property, leading them to rule the family and establish monogamy to ensure they could pass on their property to their children. The overthrow of mother right by monogamy accounted for "the world historical defeat of the female sex." But monogamy was applied only to women because 'heterism', or sexual relationships between men and unmarried women, allowed men to retain the sexual freedom they had under group marriage. Female emancipation occurred as a result of the introduction of public production under socialism, and with the emergence of an economic surplus, humanity transitioned from primitive communism to a class society, in which successive modes of production culminated in capitalism, allowing the oppressed to overthrow the oppressive system of private property.

Simmel (1956), approximately a century ago, acknowledged the universal nature of conflict in all forms of human interactions. Women fighting for equal inheritance of properties means that conflicts would arise in all social relationships inevitably, because properties are considered a scarce resource by men. As such, conflicts arise over the distribution of these scarce and valuable resources among potential alternative recipients as long as scarcity exists. Furthermore, since the most highly valued resources are frequently scarce, society and families develop rules regarding their distribution, which tend to favour men over women (Lenski, 1966). Homans (1961) employs the term

‘distributive justice’, asserting that an inequitable distribution of such scarce resources leads to anger. He also used the term ‘fair exchange’ and argued that those who do not receive a fair exchange act in a way that negatively sanctions the action. In conclusion, family conflict can arise from the distribution of scarce and valuable resources. Homans and Blau argue that anyone who feels cheated out of her/his “fair share” is likely to react with hostility toward others, resulting in conflict.

Dahrendorf (1959) proposes another perspective on why conflict occurs by using the term ‘superimposition’. He refers to superimposition as a privileged person imposing their status on the disadvantaged and writes that the more their statuses are superimposed among the disadvantaged, the more intense their involvement in a conflict will be. This phenomenon can be understood in terms of men being the privileged ones, having greater access to property inheritance rights, and women as the disadvantaged, with lesser rights. Over time, conflict arises as men continue to impose their status and deny women their rights.

Coser (1956) proposes another viewpoint, writing that conflict is more likely to occur when there are significant power differentials, making it difficult, if not impossible, for subordinates to change the system. Since time immemorial, the practice has been that men are the primary inheritors of properties. The society is structured and socialised in that way, making it difficult for women to go against it and demand their rights, which have been heavily resisted by men and have resulted in conflicts.

2.1.4 Symbolic Interactionism: Symbolic interactionism has been in the mainstream of sociological thought for over a century, beginning with James (1890), Cooley (1902), Mead (1934) and continuing through Kuhn (1964) and Blumer (1969). It is concerned with the relationship between symbols (or shared meanings) and interactions (verbal and nonverbal actions and communications). It is a framework for understanding how individuals gain meaning about the world by interacting with their social and physical environment, which includes family, peers, social groups, media, and so on. As

a result of their interactions with their social environment, humans learn to interpret and value certain items and skills as rewarding. Individuals from different social classes and peer groups learn to value various commodities as rewarding due to their unique experiences. Similarly, depending on the interaction process, values may change as an individual progresses through the social structure, acquiring new peer groups, or goes through the family life cycle (through symbolic interaction). In this, “All systems and interactions, including family systems and marital interactions, are assumed and expected to have conflict” (Eshleman, 1981). While there are many sources of conflict, it can be argued that one particular source of conflict in dyadic relationships is a perceived unequal exchange between partners, meaning the unequal distribution or inheritance of properties. Rank and LeCroy’s (1983) work organises multiple perspectives in family theory and practice while analysing social exchange theory, symbolic interactionism, and conflict theory.

2.1.5 Social Exchange: Exchange theory is a broad theoretical perspective that views human relationships as being based on the benefits and costs associated with resource exchange (Thibault & Kelley 1959; Homans 1961; Scanzoni 1970). And as the name implies, the emphasis is on human interaction in terms of exchange. Homans (1961) and Blau (1964) viewed and analysed family behaviour from a social exchange perspective. Chavannes (1901) asserts that exchange serves as the cornerstone of all human relationships and serves as the basis for the construction of society. Furthermore, all human transactions, from the largest material business transaction to the exchange of love and affection, fall under the umbrella of social exchange. Nakonezny and Wayne (2008), citing Blau (1964), state that individuals in relationships are motivated by the goodness of outcomes they are expected to bring; when the marital exchanges are fair, they develop a sense of solidarity. Edwards (1969) thus writes that the majority of interaction in any situation among fully socialised people occurs between actors occupying positions within a social structure, attempting to fulfil the role expectations associated with those positions. As a result, their behaviour is purposeful or goal-orientated rather than random, implying that

there are more or less definite rules governing the conditions of association between the actors as a result of the imposition of role expectations, and holds that when one party has more power, the other is usually at a disadvantage, which is usually a woman. Secord (1983), Osmond and Thorne (1993) and Miller and Wieling (2003) opine that gender is a central organising principle of societal structure, and social exchange theory, which works within this structure, addresses how gender influences the exchange processes in relationships.

2.1.6 Human Rights-Based Approach: The human rights approach (HRA) is a systematic approach for the human development process that is normally based on international human rights standards and operationally focused on the promotion and preservation of human rights. Based on Article 2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which outlines the principle of non-discrimination in the enjoyment of rights based on sex, as well as recognising the rights to property, food, housing, and education, among many others (UN General Assembly, 1948), it states that women's rights must be advocated, and women should be able to constructively engage in all stages, be empowered to know and claim their rights, and be provided with responsibility and access to remedies provided in instances where rights have been violated. This approach would assist women in the identification of their rights and entitlements, as well as foster the development of their rights to assert claims on properties and inheritance, which is, in fact, their universal right as human beings. Thus, embracing a human rights-based approach as a framework would be crucial in developing effective solutions to the problems faced by women in their fight against discrimination in property inheritance rights.

Ikdahl et al. (2005) write that the human rights approach, like other development theories and policies in the pursuit of pro-poor and gender-equal sustainable development, stresses human agency, capability, and entitlements as key factors in poverty alleviation, equality, and development. They also emphasised the capabilities approach (Sen, 1992, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000), which is adopted by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and

sets international standards for measuring development in terms of quality of life. Nowak (2005) states that the HRA translates the capabilities approach into a legally binding framework where entitlements are defined as rights with corresponding legal obligations for national governments and the international community to respect, protect, and fulfil these rights, as well as the principle of the non-discriminatory right to livelihood (Hellum, 2001; Koskinen, 2005).

The theoretical review integrates several viewpoints, offering a thorough comprehension of the intricacies related to women's property inheritance rights. It draws attention to the enduring impact of patriarchal customs, the significance of kinship and descent in the transfer of property, the inevitability of conflict over scarce resources, and the critical need for a human rights-based strategy to guarantee gender equality in inheritance practices. Moreover, these theories highlight the fact that inheritance is not merely a legal or economic matter but is deeply embedded in social interactions and relationships, whereby it is a social construct with major implications for gender equality and family conflict.

2.2 Methodological Review

A literature review focuses on the authors' methods as well as their findings and conclusions. This establishes a framework to understand what previous researchers have used in their approaches to data collection and analysis techniques, allowing the researchers to draw on a wide range of knowledge from the practical documents they use in fieldwork. This includes areas such as sampling, interviewing, data collection, analysis, and the ethical issues encountered during the research. The following are some of the comparable studies that have been done and the methods they used:

Hacker (2010) provides a state-of-the-art review of the contemporary gendered dimensions of inheritance to demonstrate the legal implications of limited knowledge on said issue. She reviewed a total of 23 studies from different parts of the world that pertain to the gendered practices or perceptions of inheritance, including a study she conducted herself on inheritance in Israel. She sheds light

on what is known about the gendered dimensions of inheritance, but she also exposes how little is known. She also states that almost nothing is known about women as legators in non-Western societies and very little about female legators in the West, with regard to gendered practices of heirs as well as the possible gendered aspects of inheritance conflicts.

Daley and Englert (2010) present five articles about eastern Africa that provide examples of practical methods for securing land rights for women in various contexts, and through those publications, they seek to spark new conversations about women's land rights in Africa, informed by the knowledge and understanding gained from in-depth qualitative case studies. They also aimed to guide discussions towards a proactive and pragmatic approach for identifying strategies that will effectively protect women's land rights in practice, thereby helping women from various social classes and peer groups learn to appreciate different commodities as valuable based on their unique experiences in supporting women's land rights through legal literacy, awareness-raising, and sensitisation efforts.

Toktas and O'Neil (2013) used the case study and interview methods in their field research. Through this method, the authors examined how property ownership and inheritance relate to women's empowerment, using Turkey as a case study. Although women in Turkey, similar to women in many societies worldwide, have had equal rights to own and inherit property since 1926, they continue to face discrimination. They conducted interviews about inheritance patterns among politically secular, wealthy women in Istanbul to better understand the complicated relationship between property and women's empowerment. To learn more about women's attitudes towards property and the inheritance process, researchers conducted field research in Istanbul's Nişantaşı area, which included in-depth interviews and participant observation. Interviewees were contacted using the snowball technique, and semi-structured in-depth interviews with 20 respondents were performed using 40 prepared questions, and the interviews were taped with the respondents' permission and then transcribed, coded, and analysed using qualitative research methods.

Casari and Lisciandra (2014), using the case study method, presented three aspects in their research work: Firstly, they considered institutional changes over a very long-time span, which enabled them to capture factors that shaped human societies. Secondly, the authors investigated not only a single case study but a panel of cases consisting of hundreds of communities in the Alpine region of Trentino, where each community could autonomously regulate their inheritance practices. Thirdly, the authors in their research observed that gender discrimination in property rights became more severe with the approach of the modern period; their findings provided the opportunity to study economic factors behind the process of women's inheritance rights erosion.

Mishra and Sam (2016) empirically examined the effect of women's land ownership on Nepali women's bargaining power, utilising the 2001 and 2011 Nepal Demographic and Health Surveys. They employed a stratified two-stage cluster method to sample respondents aged 15-45 based on household structures and occupations and used interviews to assess the impacts of land ownership, finding that it significantly increases women's empowerment.

Rai (2016), in her doctoral thesis, used a descriptive and exploratory approach and applied both quantitative and qualitative methods in her study. The researcher also collected data using questionnaires and structured interviews to understand perspectives on their rights. In her thesis, Rai concludes that the inheritance system is primarily based on traditional practices that favour males, and she notes that the Sikkim Government Succession Act, enacted in 2008, is intended to provide equal property inheritance rights for women in Sikkim but has not yet been fully implemented.

O'Neil and Toktas (2017), in their study in Turkey, utilised evidence collected through field research conducted in two different residential settings in Istanbul to analyse women's access to property using a comparative method. The authors also conducted in-depth interviews with women from two different communities, one secular and one Islamic, and found that both groups of women had different perspectives on the world and how it is organised. Those

beliefs toward gender equality and difference shaped the women's relationships with property and the succession process.

Kola (2018), in her doctoral dissertation, focuses on a much-neglected issue in Albania: the links between inheritance of property rights, economic empowerment, and domestic violence, and discovered a complex set of factors: legal, social, institutional, and ideological -that underpin the persistent gap in women's rights to inherit property. The technique she used in her study was a qualitative approach to examine the Albanian legal framework for property inheritance and property rights, as well as academic literature, academic papers, books, journals, articles, working papers, and reports.

Rekha and Yaseen (2012), in their project, focused on analysing the opinions of government officials on the property rights of women and the measures they have taken to revise the existing law and policies to eradicate discrimination against women in the inheritance of property, using a descriptive research design with a questionnaire and interview methods to collect data. The authors said that one of the challenges they faced was women's fear of voicing their opinions about their patriarchal society.

Meinzen-Dick et al. (2017) analysed the available high-quality information on the benefits of strengthening women's land rights for development outcomes connected to poverty reduction using a systematic search process. The authors also referred to several internet databases (Web of Science, PubMed, and the IFPRI Ebrary), which were then evaluated for eligibility. The authors 'snowballed' additional titles from reference lists in articles and checked the websites of key land tenure institutions. Additionally, because the study examined various outcomes and methodological approaches, a qualitative review methodology was adopted to synthesise the findings.

Lastly, Shil and Jangir (2021) examine how gender influences women's access to property rights inheritance, with a specific focus on Tripuri women. They conducted a field survey in West Tripura and focus group discussions in Tripura's Dhalai area and tried to discover how property ownership affects

their income and position in the household. The survey conducted by Shil and Jangir also revealed that 20 out of 54 married women in West Tripura's rural areas inherited property, but just two out of 13 married women in the city received it. Dhalai, in comparison to West Tripura, has a low ratio of women inheriting property (only 4 out of 38 married women).

A comprehensive analysis of different literatures and works on women's property and inheritance rights necessitates the use of diverse research methods to capture the full complexity of this issue. Several qualitative and quantitative approaches have proven effective in prior studies, such as the case study method, qualitative interviews, surveys and questionnaires, focus group discussions, systematic literature reviews and the comparative method in different studies undertaken. In the following section, a comprehensive thematic review, organised into eight distinct sub-themes, has been presented to analyse existing available literature.

2.3 Thematic Reviews

A thematic analysis is used to examine themes within a topic by detecting, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within a research topic, which would offer invaluable perspectives on understanding the concept further. Thus, the following available literature is reviewed in a thematic order:

2.3.1 Property Rights and Gender

Many scholars have highlighted their views and findings to cast a gender-analytic lens on the allocation and factors that influence property rights, recognising the importance of women's access to, use of, and control over productive resources. Consequently, we can identify critical gender discrepancies in property rights and demonstrate their impact on women's empowerment.

Agarwal (1994) focuses on the connection between gender inequality and control over property and finds that there is a persistent gap between women's legal rights and their actual ownership of land, or between ownership and

control, in South Asia, despite progressive legislation, largely due to a complex range of social, administrative and ideological factors. Agarwal also says that the links between gender subordination and property, as well as who controls and owns it, should also be examined. She says women have the same legal rights to property ownership, but that doesn't mean they own it. She concludes by noting that several factors must be considered to improve women's ability to assert their property rights and maintain control over them, which include establishing the validity of the claim, enhancing women's legal knowledge and literacy, and lastly, establishing support that would lessen women's dependence on brothers and close kin.

Meinzen-Dick et al. (1997) discuss the outcomes of a conference on gender and property rights in which they emphasised how gender analysis can help to understand the differences in the rights to and uses of different resources and how that knowledge can help develop better property rights policies. They therefore note that moving past the typical legal interpretations of property rights is the first step in this understanding and that one must acknowledge a wider range of customary rights and practices to identify the various bundles of rights that men and women may have to use and manage resources, as well as how these are negotiated or change over time. However, they also stressed the importance of avoiding romanticising 'community' and 'tradition' as the protectors of women's access to resources, as in many other contexts, local and customary institutions have shown to be the strongest biases against women's control over resources. In their discussion, they also stated that women have faced significant obstacles to obtaining rights through purchase, inheritance, and state titling programmes. Thus, they stressed the crucial roles that gender plays in socio-cultural structures, values, and practices, as well as the significant role that gender plays in kinship systems. They came to the conclusion that policies need to deal with gender inequalities if they want to help the economy grow as a whole, even though there are limits on how much they can affect how property rights are used in different places.

Steinzor (2003) writes that women around the world own an estimated 1-2 per cent of all titled land and are frequently denied the right to inherit property. This lack of property and inheritance rights for women is influenced by various cultural, social, political, and legal variables, and specific patterns of ownership and exclusion vary greatly. She believes that in both rural and urban contexts, women are at a significant disadvantage in terms of getting a place to reside, maintaining a basis for survival, and accessing economic possibilities due to a lack of control over both productive and non-productive resources. Furthermore, she concludes that women's lack of property and inheritance rights has been increasingly linked to development-related issues in nations all over the world, such as low educational levels, starvation, and inadequate health.

Subsequently, Deere and Doss (2006) state that a gender asset gap exists, viewing property ownership to enhance women's status in countries where they are marginalised. Despite significant progress in the twentieth century towards closing the gender gap in property ownership, men still own and manage the majority of private property in most regions.

Varley (2007) states that a highly controversial aspect of development policy is securing women's property rights in both urban housing and rural land holdings. She believes that women's property rights require a proactive approach, as legal equality may not succeed in preventing gender differences in property ownership, even when it provides title for the family. Thus, there have been calls for alternative strategies that emphasise local or customary authorities and procedures due to dissatisfaction with state programmes that deliver individual titles. However, evidence suggests that women's status in customary law is a hotly contested topic, as they are perceived as second-class citizens who fail to protect their rights. She therefore questions the effectiveness of either approach in addressing gender inequalities and suggested that there seems to be a growing consensus that some intervention to protect women's interests is necessary when working with formal legal systems and customary procedures to secure land tenure or rights, and that the use of

paralegals: volunteers trained to promote women's rights at a local level, with support from an NGO network response within state institutions, may be helpful.

Baruah (2007) explores the gendered aspects of land tenure and landed property rights in Indian slums and examines the significance of landed property in the lives of women, as well as looking into certain aspects. Do women in low-income urban communities have different land and housing needs from men? What particular elements help or hinder urban women's access to and control over landed property? How can government and non-government organisations aid urban women's efforts to obtain housing, land, and sanitation services? What specific opportunities, skills, and legislative and policy changes are required for urban women to be more powerful than men when it comes to owning landed property? The author found that, despite strong evidence, South Asian governments have continued to prioritise health, nutrition, and poverty reduction programmes over gender-focused reforms in land ownership rights, legal literacy, and political equality. She notes that, with a few notable exceptions, most non-governmental organisations in the area have shown a reluctance to tackle the challenges of addressing land and property issues for women, which are known to be contentious in any country but especially sensitive in India due to its strong patriarchal culture and religious or cultural laws that perpetuate inequalities. In her article, she concludes that the critical importance of women asserting their rights to landed property is hampered by twin impediments, which are the customary rights and the persistence of patriarchal cultural traditions that deny them any real control over landed resources and power.

In their work, Toktas and O'Neil (2013) revealed that women in Turkey practised inheritance, demonstrating a strong dedication to gender equality. Although equality was not always defined in terms of similarity, the families made a concerted effort to attain a fair allocation of family wealth. The writers note that, most intriguingly and in contrast to the literature, the women did not

express any sense of empowerment as a result of their property ownership position; rather, education and career were shown to be more important.

Rabenhorst and Bean (2016) write that gender equality in property rights is a crucial factor for overall economic development and a critical human rights problem. Their study examines three aspects of international development that are rarely discussed together or in relation to one another: (1) women's rights to full legal and societal participation in property usage and ownership; (2) the importance of property rights in urban areas to economic development; and (3) the role of women in economic development. Through the integration of these concerns, they gave solutions for the more successful development of programming and implementation.

Djurfeldt (2020) looks into the potential connections between gender-based discrimination and the concurrent processes of land fragmentation and privatisation, as well as into the country-level empirical evidence of this discrimination in light of legal reforms made, based on the research questions: "Do the land tenure and land use practices in these nations discriminate against women? If so, how does this discrimination continue to be supported by formal, informal, and social norms"? The literature reviewed revealed discrepancies between the noble goals of gender equality outlined in the formal legal code and the actual practices of gender-discriminatory customs and norms. She found that the implementation of statutory law, which had a strong intention to promote gender equality, was difficult due to the prevalence of customary norms and traditions, legal pluralism, lack of adequate legal infrastructure, low awareness, and limited administrative and technical capacity. In the findings, she also highlights the limited impact of land tenure reforms in addressing gender inequality and the poor prospects for leveraging welfare effects from such reforms in the absence of a wider structural and normative shift that would free women from restrictions on their ability to own property.

Feyertag et al. (2021) provide a global overview of women's perception on tenure security by analysing individual-level data from 33 countries gathered as part of the Property Rights Index. Their results show that men and women are equally likely to lose land rights. However, gender-specific sources of insecurity contribute to significant regional variations. They also mentioned that men are more likely to have a legal claim to property because they have more resources to buy or build it, and they are given preference when it comes to inheritance. They suggested that formal property rights documentation may be a useful method of shielding both men and women from external sources of insecurity, but not from internal ones brought on by spousal death or divorce, and noted that to safeguard women from internal sources of tenure insecurity, policymakers must go beyond enacting new laws or adopting a system of titling. Given that these sources come from other family members, housemates, or community members, they need additional support in the form of legal empowerment, which includes educating women about their rights, showing them how to uphold them, and giving them the necessary (legal) support.

The thematic review of the literature on property rights and gender reveals persistent gender inequalities in ownership and control of property due to socio-cultural barriers. This review offers insights into the various dimensions and impacts of these disparities, as well as the economic and development implications, legal reforms, and their limitations. Addressing these disparities will require comprehensive strategies that integrate legal reforms with socio-cultural and economic interventions. Furthermore, by adopting a holistic approach, it is possible to enhance women's property rights, thereby contributing to their empowerment and broader socio-economic development.

2.3.2 Women and Land Ownership

Women around the world have access to, own and enjoy land ownership differently according to their customs and traditions, and gender equality in land ownership and other productive assets and properties often faces many obstacles around the world, preventing women from fully exercising their

rights or disadvantaging them in terms of ownership. This has been shown by different scholars in their writings:

Katz and Chamorro (2002) investigated the factors that influence the total amount of land owned by women. They discovered that a woman's age, education, and headship of the household were all related to the amount of land she owned in a positive and significant way, and also the land area owned by the woman's parents or her husband had no bearing on the woman's land ownership.

Deere et al. (2005) write that female land ownership is positively associated with whether a woman's parents were landowners, the amount of land they owned, the gender composition of a woman's siblings (those without brothers being more likely to inherit land), age, widowhood, household headship, and education. They also suggested that women with more education would be better able to defend their potential land rights and that education could be used as a proxy for labour market opportunities and thus the ability to buy land on their own.

Giovarelli (2006) asserts that economic power and the capacity to negotiate inside the home are the two main advantages brought about by land ownership and its control. Women's economic position advances as the well-being of both household members and heads of households depends on their ability to access land. Customary or formal land ownership for women provides them with access to important marketplaces for commerce as well as social access to non-market institutions like household and local government structures. Land ownership also acts as a crucial component of agricultural production and a source of revenue through rent or sales, creating a security for credit that may be utilised for either consumption or investment; land ownership plainly delivers immediate economic benefits. Additionally, women become *de facto* household leaders and have greater claims to asset distribution because of their land rights within marriage. Beyond the clear economic advantages of land

ownership, these property rights empower women in discussions with family members, the community, and society at large.

Deere and Doss (2006) point out that there is a significant gender gap in land ownership. They claim that in Cameroon, less than 10 per cent of title deeds correspond to women, and in Kenya, only 5 per cent of women own land in their names, citing the work of ICRW (2005). Also, according to Rugadya et al. (2005), in Uganda, only 7 per cent of women own their land. Deere and Doss (2006) also write that women held land in only 10 per cent of Ghanaian households, while men held land in 16–23 per cent. As a result, the average value of men's landholdings was nearly three times that of women's landholdings.

Shrestha (2009) observes that women's authority over land confers them economic, social, and political clout, and that women who have greater control over land are less likely to experience economic vulnerability. She adds that land ownership is one of the potential variables to empower women and enhance the welfare and well-being of women and their families, while noting the work of (Allendorf, 2007). She continues by saying that by handing legal ownership of the land to poor women, the owners gain not just increased security but also access to credit, the ability to use their land as collateral for loans, and the ability to succeed, all of which contribute to the empowerment of women.

Basnet (2012) contends that women's control and equal rights in land have received insufficient attention. She thus focuses on the linkage between empowerment and women's land entitlement, based on the research question: To what extent does land ownership empower women within the family? Who owns land, and on what basis? And do women holding land engage more in household decision-making than those with no ownership? In doing so, she looks into the socio-cultural and economic factors that inhibit or contribute to women's entitlement to land and also discusses how women's property rights can empower them and benefit their families. Her research demonstrates that

women still lack sufficient access to and control over resources due to poor governance, poverty, illiteracy, prevailing socio-cultural and economic factors, and legislative provisions that fail to address equality and empowerment issues. Additionally, women occupy a low position in society because of inheritance laws, patrilocal residency, and patrilineal systems.

Doss et al. (2015) highlight that girls own less than 2 per cent of the world's land and make up less than 5 per cent of agricultural proprietors in North Africa, while in sub-Saharan Africa, this figure is approximately 15 per cent. They also state that women are five times less likely than men to own land in developing countries and that women's farms are often smaller and less fertile. While comparing countries, they found that Burundi and Rwanda had the highest levels of female landownership at 54 per cent, whereas Senegal and Tanzania both had the lowest levels at 11 per cent. In contrast, the percentage of women-headed households that own land in Latin America is small (Diana Deere et al., 2012).

Agarwal et al. (2021) assessed the parameters of rural women's land ownership in Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand and Odisha and computed several measures for land-owning households with female owners. They found that from ICRISAT data in 2014, women owned land in only 16 per cent of the households across the regions, while 84 per cent had no female owners at all, with the south again doing better than the rest of India. 23 per cent of all landowners in South India were women, relative to only 10 per cent and 11 per cent in West and Central and East India, respectively. State-wise, the highest percentage of households with female landowners was in Telangana, and the lowest was in Odisha. Comparable figures for men in the two states are 82 per cent and 98 per cent. They noted that even nine years after the enactment of the HSAA 2005 and over six decades since the enactment of the HSA 1956, which gave women considerable rights in property (even if unequal to men's), there are still fewer households with women landowners.

Ansary and Ramya (2024) emphasised that property and land ownership are fundamental to women's social and economic empowerment, guaranteeing security and financial stability and providing a lasting safeguard against poverty, divorce, desertion, or widowhood. They also stated that property ownership positively impacts children's welfare and women's fertility decisions. However, traditional cultures and patriarchal norms often restrict women from owning assets, with rights frequently passing to male counterparts.

Mehpara and Kumar (2025) in their work, have stated that property and land ownership are crucial for women's social and economic empowerment, giving them economic stability and security in case of divorce or widowhood. However, despite these benefits and supportive laws, women often cannot exercise their rights or may lose them due to discriminatory cultural norms and patriarchal systems that forbid women from owning assets or limit their access to customary rights typically reserved for men.

Legal frameworks, socio-cultural norms, and economic factors shape the persistent gender disparities in land ownership, as the literature reviewed shows. While legal reforms are necessary, they are inadequate without addressing the underlying socio-cultural factors. To ensure fair land ownership and control, women must be empowered through education, legal literacy, and support systems. This, in turn, can significantly enhance women's economic, social, and political status, thereby contributing to broader socio-economic development.

2.3.3 Female Bargaining Power

Strengthening women's property rights has been shown in numerous studies to increase bargaining power within the family, provide a sense of security, and contribute to a higher social status in society, thus ensuring better education, health, and nutrition for their children, as well as reducing gender-based violence, among other benefits. Studies have demonstrated these benefits.

Agarwal (1997) asserts that property provides certain security, and a home or piece of land physically conveys the strength of a woman's fallback position and visible escape opportunities, acting as a deterrent to marital violence.

Kabeer (1999) indicated that access to properties, like land, increased a woman's financial security and strengthened their household bargaining power. Property ownership allows women to have more control over decisions that affect their lives, such as childbearing (Malhotra & Schuler, 2005; Ashraf, Karlan, & Yin, 2010; Aslam & Kingdon, 2012; Doss, 2013) and shifting the assets to women reduces their discrimination (Thomas, Contreras & Frankenberg, 2002). More literature also suggests that owning property in a woman's name elevates her and therefore alters her life and the lives of her children (Swaminathan et al., 2012; Oduro et al., 2015; Mishra & Sam, 2016).

Panda and Agarwal (2005) focus on a previously unexplored aspect that contributes to women's risk of marital violence: their property position. The author assessed the prevalence and correlation of both physical and psychological violence based on a household survey in Kerala and discovered that women who own immovable property suffer a much lower risk of marital violence than women who do not own immovable property.

Mardon (2005) examines the impact of female land rights and collective action on intra-household bargaining power. She finds that, when individual and household characteristics are held constant, women's land rights are associated with higher rates of autonomous decision-making in agrarian reform settlements in six states. She discovers that women's involvement in social movements that coordinate economic and political collective action also enhances their voices.

Bhatla, Chakraborty and Duvvury (2006) report that women's resistance to domestic violence is aided by the security of property ownership, which allows them to escape abusive marriages or partners.

Datta (2006) states that property ownership affords many women a feeling of empowerment and encouragement in their fight against repression and more bargaining power within the household, leading to increased spending on children's nutrition and education (Pandey, 2010; Wiig, 2013; Menon et al., 2014) and helps people avoid poverty and increase their liberty (Agarwal, 1994, 1997; Haddad et al., 1997; Anderson and Eswaran, 2009).

Nagarajan et al. (2010) examined a change in inheritance legislation in two Indian states, Maharashtra and Karnataka, which improved the status of females in terms of family land inheritance, putting them on par with sons. Women's academic performance before the change in legislation was compared to women's educational attainment after her father's demise. After the change in legislation, it was found that the reform of inheritance laws had a positive effect on girls' education.

Adam et al. (2011) compared suicide rates between married and unmarried women before a family law reform in Ontario, Canada, which improved the economic status of women upon divorce. They found that the legislation reform reduced suicide rates among older married women but had little effect on younger single women. All these empirical studies suggest that women's property ownership and legislative reforms have a positive effect on bargaining power, leading to higher education, better health, less discrimination and fewer suicides.

Hossain and Nikolov (2021) explore the effect of the passage of the Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act 2005 (HSAA), which conferred improved inheritance rights to unmarried women in India, on child height in India. They found clear evidence that the passage of the HSAA substantially improved the child's health. Specifically, they found that the HSAA reform improved child height, or the height-for-age by 0.183 standard deviations. They also showed that the HSAA generated higher prenatal and postnatal investments in the areas that implemented the HSAA, providing better female bargaining power and improved household wealth due to improvements in the wife's unearned

income. Brule (2010) concurs that revising the Hindu Succession Act boosted women's perceived ownership of household land, and they reported more bargaining power and a chance of inheriting land. However, although the reform had minimal impact on gender equality in property ownership, households with an HSAA recipient spend more on women's goods, medical care, and children's education. Deininger et al. (2013) found that the reform also led to an increase in female education, labour supply, autonomy and more bargaining power (Mookerjee, 2015). But Anderson and Genicot (2015) pointed out that more suicides and wife beatings occurred as a result of the reform, which scholars ascribe to increased dispute over property within the family.

Bahrami-Rad (2021) contends that although female property ownership is linked to better results for women, in patrilineal civilisations, their opportunity to inherit property may lead to more restrictive marital standards. Women who are subjected to the female inheritance rule are more likely to marry their paternal relatives and are less likely to work, particularly in agriculture, according to the study. He also discusses how, in developing countries, simply enacting female inheritance could have unintended consequences for young women's premarital lives, marital choices, and economic participation. He suggests that the welfare effects of these consequences should be investigated further in future research, which some scholars have already conducted with differing conclusions. Some scholars have found a positive impact on girls' schooling and the likelihood of daughters inheriting property (Nagarajan et al., 2010), while others have found no impact on girls' education (Bose & Das, 2017), an increase in female suicide cases (Anderson & Genicot, 2015), a preference for sons (Bhalotra et al., 2020), and no influence on the likelihood of daughters inheriting land (Roy, 2015).

Gupta (2022), citing the works of other scholars, writes that the reform has led to an increase in women's autonomy, and women's bargaining power in households increases when they have access to and ownership of assets (Agarwal, 1994; Wang, 2014); this also creates numerous opportunities for

their well-being (Field et al., 2021) and improves the welfare of future generations (Duflo, 2003). And expanding empirical evidence also suggests that securing women's property ownership correlates to decreased insecurities, environmental sustainability, and investments in the next generation (Nagarajan et al., 2010; Peterman, 2011; Kumar & Quisumbing, 2013). Women's equality in rights thus acts as a powerful policy tool for empowering women and improving their well-being.

The literature emphasises the critical role of strengthening women's property rights by enhancing their bargaining power within the family and society. Numerous studies have shown that women who own property have more freedom, safety, and a higher social status. These benefits translate into better nutrition, health care, and education for their offspring, as well as a decrease in gender-based violence. Overall, the empirical evidence consistently shows that securing women's property ownership is generally correlated with numerous benefits, including decreased insecurities, environmental sustainability, and investments in future generations.

2.3.4 Family Conflict over Inheritance of Properties by Women

The existing studies on women inheriting properties or having rights to access and own properties have been shown to empower the women and encouraging them in their fight against repression as well as providing them with more bargaining power within their household and have more control. This involves making decisions that impact their lives, reducing discrimination, elevating their societal status, and ultimately achieving greater financial stability. These inheritance rights and property ownership do prove to be advantageous for the women, providing more opportunities. However, society constructs and assigns different roles to men and women, giving them varying statuses, and in almost all societies, women remain deeply embedded in the structures of family and gender roles. Thus, women inheriting or owning properties often become a major source of dispute, causing distress among family members and households, as ownership and inheritance are not simply about positive or

negative aspects but involve more complex dimensions, often resulting in conflicts.

Titus et al. (1979) study the dynamics of family inheritance disputes through the use of 14 case studies and write that the conflict shattered kinship relationships, particularly between adult siblings. These conflicts occur because of the impossibility of achieving fairness by all heirs' standards, as well as the impossibility of dividing property and assets and real estate equally, which are the main sources of problems.

Lawton et al. (1994) state that generations within families provide or exchange not only material and financial resources but also other types of support: structural (accommodation), instrumental, associational (contact among members), consensual (sharing opinions), and expressive (emotional and moral support such as offering love, pride, and status). Such family dynamics in which support is given and received are sources of both solidarity and conflict (Bengtson & Harootyan, 1994; Arber & Attias-Donfut, 2000; Brannen, 2006). Spilerman (2000) and Piketty (2014) also supported this statement that assets acquired through intergenerational transfer have become a major source of social stratification between families. These intergenerational transfers can occur between grandparents and grandchildren and can hurt horizontal family relations between siblings or among wider kin, such as aunts, uncles, cousins, and step-relations (Kohli, 1999).

Griffiths (2002) writes that men misuse their control over family property, and since women are reliant on male networks and structures of authority, they must actively engage men's cooperation. Conflict between siblings or men over inheritance is dependent on a framework in which their claims are influenced by prevailing norms that uphold sources of male power and authority. Griffiths (1997) asserted that these interconnected factors shape women's societal roles. Occasionally, men establish structures and conditions that grant them certain forms of power over women. These male agencies are ingrained in the social structure in which women function. Consequently, when faced with the

limitations imposed by a patriarchal society, women find themselves in a different position regarding their power and ability to create and pursue property claims. Thus, whatever their position, women must negotiate their status and property rights in terms of deeply ingrained social perceptions of family and women's role within it, and Griffiths (2002) also says that women's primary goal is to change the society's practices in a way that is more responsive to their needs, rather than subverting or drastically altering the society's premises. This understanding does not necessarily imply seeking equality with men in terms of property control or distribution, but rather that any decision made should be just and protected against men who abuse their power by misappropriating family property and using it for their own ends. Women put a lot of emphasis on this (Griffiths, 1996) because they accept the prevailing social norm that men are the natural custodians of family property, and it is their responsibility to ensure that it is passed down to the next generation.

Izuhara and Koppe (2019) observe that inheritance can lead to family unrest, disagreements, and dissatisfaction and can also serve as a platform for the expression or exacerbation of tensions that already exist in families. Such transfers have various effects, including financial, practical, and emotional ones, and they can affect different members in different ways. They thus take into account a multi-dimensional understanding of family relations, including relational (family solidarity, conflict, and ambivalence), functional (transfers and exchanges of accommodation, financial assets, and non-material support), and structural aspects (vertical and horizontal relations, in-laws, step and common-law relations) as given by Finch (1989), to investigate the topic of intergenerational kinship and family disputes.

While women who inherit properties are empowered and have more negotiating power in their households, this situation also frequently leads to serious family conflicts and discontent. Complex factors related to ownership and inheritance, extending beyond mere financial benefits or drawbacks,

contribute to this disinheritance. Conflicts are greatly influenced by the deeply ingrained gender roles and customs in society, which are a reflection of broader views regarding women's property and rights. Addressing these disputes requires broader social changes that challenge patriarchal structures and ensure equitable property rights for women, thereby fostering family harmony and supporting women's empowerment.

2.3.5 Barriers to Women's Property Inheritance

Women face many challenges when it comes to their rights to access, own, and control land and property around the world. First, there is discrimination in laws and regulations, and the next is the preference for sons over daughters and patriarchal practices. These are common barriers to women's access to and control over productive resources. Moreover, there is the assumption that men, as household heads, control and manage such assets. The following literature reveals that:

Agarwal (1994) highlights that, although modern laws established by the state increasingly grant daughters inheritance rights when they are recognised as individuals in their communities, the marriage process and traditional patrilineal customs have largely remained unchanged. He also states that gender ideologies, or ideas and assumptions about a gender's expected traits, and the prevalence of traditional attitudes and practices make it difficult for women to obtain property rights.

Giovarelli (2006) points out that while women in many nations have access to the use of land through their husbands or fathers, hurdles imposed by customs around marriage, divorce, bride price or dowry, and polygamy prevent them from owning land or having rights that would allow them to do so. These traditions typically govern how wealth is passed down via families and communities, as well as how to care for young people and the elderly. Generally speaking, cultural barriers against women owning land are more potent than legal laws enabling it. Furthermore, because of their connections, it

is impossible to study marriage practices without also considering inheritance customs.

Karadag (2006) found that many in the business class regard property ownership as primarily a male entitlement. As a result, they note that many women have been disadvantaged in inheritance, with the most valuable property passing to men, which is especially true in productive agricultural lands. Furthermore, they assert that even when women inherited properties, male family members maintained their authority over them.

Giovarelli et al. (2013) opined that when patriarchal social norms favour male members of society, customary rules might be presumed to constitute impediments to the succession of property rights, resulting in insufficient autonomous access to land ownership, as also shared by Chigbu (2019). Accordingly, the Global Entrepreneurship and Development Index found that women do not have the same access to property rights as men and are restricted by legislative requirements or discriminatory practices existing within the countries (Terjesen & Lloyd, 2015).

Ditz (2014) investigated the connection between inheritance and kinship. In the late colonial period, they discovered that inheritance patterns substantially favoured male heirs and produced shared property rights. These norms persisted throughout the early nineteenth century, and only sons were allowed to become householders, allowing them to enjoy the power that came with owning considerable productive land. They believed that focusing on women and inheritance meant taking a closer look at authority relations within patriarchal families, which may refer to paternal control over children or, more broadly, to all types of male domination over women.

Rawal and Agrawal (2016) looked at the socio-cultural, structural, legal, administrative, and institutional barriers that women face when accessing and owning land. They found that in all three districts, less than 50 per cent of women have ownership of land and identified patriarchy and conservative social set-ups as one persistent barrier to women's land ownership in all the

study districts. Furthermore, based on their findings, they provided several recommendations and wrote that it is imperative to remove legal barriers that hamper women's access to land and guarantee women's equal inheritance rights without any form of gender bias. Lastly, they pointed out the need for campaigns and advocacy programmes through civil society organisations to strengthen and empower communities.

Richardson et al. (2018) assert that for land rights to be secure, they must be legitimate, resilient, durable, exercisable, and enforceable. However, they point out that women's rights to land are frequently less resilient than those of men and are less likely to be protected by formal or customary law due to gender bias. They further contend that, unlike men, who typically inherit land rights, women typically acquire their rights to use or access land through their relationships, such as marriage. Additionally, they point out that women often face greater challenges than men in exercising their rights and that women's rights tend to be less enduring than men's. Due to cultural restrictions, women are also less likely to be aware of their specific rights or know where to go to exercise them, which results in a lower likelihood of having independent access to dispute resolution procedures.

Bosuben (2018) asserts that cultural practices, illiteracy, and poor socioeconomic standing are the main causes of restrictions on women's ability to own or inherit land. She explains that the patriarchal nature of the system, where males typically control access to and ownership of land, results in most land being registered in their names. She also concludes that fear acts as a barrier, leading women to tolerate violations of their property rights rather than confronting physical harm.

Shil and Jangir (2021) found that women do not inherit property because sons need it to care for their parents, and since the costs of marriage are borne by the brother or parents, women have no right to claim property to avoid unnecessary family disputes. Thus, they concluded that societal prejudices prevent women from claiming their rightful part of their family property.

Genicot and Hernandez-de-Benito (2022) investigate the scope of rural women's land rights and how patrilineal traditions affect them, or how this fundamental conflict between customary and statutory law affects women's de facto property rights. They discovered a conflict between statutory laws establishing equal rights for men and women and customary practices that overtly discriminate against women inheriting properties. Additionally, they point out that gender inequality exists in the village institutions that play a significant part in the interaction between statutory and customary law and that traditional patrilineal practice continues to be important when it comes to inheritance. They discovered, in particular, that widows' inheritance rights are influenced by the gender of their children and that firstborn sons are expected to inherit more property than firstborn daughters.

Furthermore, several barriers to women's inheritance of property have been highlighted in numerous studies, such as gender bias in titling the land in favour of women (Grown et al., 2005); patriarchal property rights, including husbands' control over wives' labour time (Braunstein, 2001); inadequate laws and systems of enforcement (Giovarelli & Wamalwa, 2011); and insufficient understanding of existing legal provisions (McCreery, 1976). Moreover, structural barriers such as patriarchal norms, customary laws, and attitudes stemming from gendered ideologies or societal expectations contribute to women's limited access to land (Boone, 2013; Artur & Hilhorst, 2014; Chant & McIlwaine, 2015; Achandi et al., 2018).

Women worldwide face several obstacles in exercising their rights to access, own, and control land and property. These problems are caused by laws that treat women unfairly, customs that favour sons over daughters, and cultural norms that support gender inequality. In addition, the studies show that, to ensure women's equal access to and control over property rights, cultural and societal norms must be addressed just as much as legal reforms. Women's rights must be promoted throughout communities and generations, and patriarchal structures must be challenged to empower women legally and economically. However, in a society where patriarchy shapes the social

structure, can the system be challenged to grant certain rights to women that are not considered the norm?

2.3.6 Women and Property Inheritance in Customary Laws

Giovarelli (2006) identifies that when it comes to land or property ownership, the rights of the ancestral family or tribe are regarded more highly than the rights of the individual. This principle, which is prevalent in a lot of non-Western law and tradition, is crucial to understanding the backdrop of women's property rights. She also states that there are two distinct issues surrounding land rights for women: (1) A woman's right to use, control, own, sell, buy, lease, inherit, or dispose of land depends on whether she is a part of a marriage, a civil union, or her biological family, and (2) is it legal for women who are single, separated, widowed, abandoned, or second wives to use, possess, govern, lease, inherit, or transfer away land? And even though household events like birth, marriage, and death have a significant impact on women's land rights, they cannot be analysed separately because they are part of a larger family system. She presents two arguments: (1) women should have the right to use, own, govern, and dispose of land or other property of equal economic value to ensure equality and promote the economic and physical security of women globally; and (2) those who draft laws and policies intended to grant land rights to women in countries with customary law must understand and operate within the principles of customary law that coexist with national laws. She therefore concludes that the ability to use and enforce women's rights to land and property depends on both social and legal recognition, and although it is necessary, legislation alone cannot bring about the required reforms by itself, as women's ability to exercise their rights to land is impacted by cultural norms, customary law, discriminatory legislation, and institutions.

Joireman (2008) highlights that customary law and the complex status of women are two significant barriers to capital accumulation that must be addressed through the establishment and enforcement of property rights. The author believes that the most significant issue is in enforcing the laws required

for capital accumulation and thus placed the most emphasis on it in the article. He points out that customary laws, which different ethnic groups have developed for their own internal organisations and administrations, have the greatest influence over people in rural areas and regulate matters like marriage and inheritance. Due to the customary laws, the author notes that the majority of women lack co-ownership of marital property, independent claims to ancestry or family land after marriage, and the ability to preserve and maintain their residences and personal property if their husbands pass away or are divorced. Numerous social and customary regulations prohibit women from acting as legally recognised economic players, even though such laws do exist. Abdullah and Hamza (2003) share the same view and note that access to land and women's property rights are related to inheritance trends, where daughters typically inherit less than sons, and sometimes nothing at all due to customary laws. Joireman (2008) concludes by stating that regarding women's land rights, there are two major issues: the first is the lack of autonomous property rights to either privately or traditionally owned land, and the second is the non-enforcement of women's inheritance rights. Thus, for women to have access to property and the capital that can be generated by property ownership, legally recognised co-ownership of marital property should be ensured. Additionally, efforts must be made to guarantee that women do not fully lose access to capital in land and other forms of property during the process of codifying customary property rights. Furthermore, customary law needs to be altered to comply with constitutional equality obligations if it has been defined in a way that prevents women from having access to land or from pursuing title.

The Rural Development Institute (2009), in a study conducted, concluded that, like many regions of the world, women do not typically inherit land in South Asia. The reasons behind this are numerous and varied, and they differ from one group to the next. The study also writes that formal legislation, on one hand, may be discriminatory, but in the face of customary laws, it does not recognise equitable property rights for women, leaving formal laws entirely meaningless, severely limiting a woman's right to inherit. These women's

rights were created over the course of a lengthy, sluggish process, with the legalisation of their property rights, marking a significant turning point. In many poor nations, however, females still have worse property inheritance rights than sons (Doepke et al., 2012).

Fernandes and Bharali (2009) described customary laws as components of ethnic traditions and practices that people view as integral to their identity and culture. Agarwal (1994) also states that the operation of customary laws acts as an influential instrument to define the positions of men and women and direct respectable norms of conduct, and Krishna (2005) held that women's social and economic status continues to be influenced by customary rules. Almost all the customary law of the region, which includes "people's beliefs, customs, social mores, precepts, rites, and usages practised since time immemorial", is not always favourable to women's interests, and "property and marriage are extremely repressive for women" (Nongbri, 1998). The customary laws deny them equal rights to property and inheritance, which is one of the important factors affecting their empowerment (Agarwal, 1994).

Daley and Englert (2010) present custom and customary institutions as primarily local practices and institutions, rather than necessarily traditional practices and institutions, making it simpler to work with a practical approach that looks at the situation on the ground as it is and asks what can be done to maximise the gains for women? Thereby, rather than replacing existing custom, a better strategy for land tenure reform would be to consider how it can be updated and reformed instead, as existing custom must be accommodated. Thus, in the fight for women's land rights, we can work to improve what already exists while also trying to change it in the pursuit of women's land rights. Lastly, they discussed evidence-based policy-making at the outset and then determined what strategies are most effective for achieving the desired outcome.

Agnes and Ghosh (2012) discussed that women always have to compromise with their rights in a society because of the varied types of practices and

customs imposed on them in moral realms. Women bear the brunt of gender discrimination and also have to forfeit most of their rights. On the other hand, multiple legal systems with customary and religious laws governing various communities greatly concern women because they create hindrances in property inheritance rights from their parents. The communities that follow the patriarchal system also play a crucial role in disinherit women of property rights. She also asserted that the personal laws of various communities primarily shape women's economic rights and conditions (Agnes, 1999). Indian society brings with it the frameworks of patriarchal, patrilocal and patrilineal character: 'patriarchy' denotes the power of a cultural relationship with heightened human supremacy. Such a traditional and social structure of ownership in property inheritance ensures the governance of men, limiting a woman's right (Gonsalves, 1993; Anita, 2007; Rao, 2008b). Kaushik (2007) states that most tribal communities in India follow a patriarchal social structure, and these societies share a common experience regarding property inheritance, where tribal women do not inherit property rights. Anita (2007) further writes that customary laws deny women the property right because male-centric societies seemingly disallow it.

According to Dwidhiti (2018), the complex issues surrounding tribal women's property rights, which involve kinship, tribal culture, and deeply ingrained gender norms, often leave them vulnerable to the multiple laws that govern their land access. Because India lacks a uniform civil code to harmonise religious personal laws and replace diverse tribal customary laws with a single common code, a gender-sensitive legal framework for women's property rights may result. However, the highly politicised nature of a uniform civil code is likely to provoke intense opposition and agitation from various sources. Codification may confer greater legitimacy to tribal customary laws, but any process that attempts to document customs would need to be aware of the effects not only of transcription but also of the validation of many unfair gender practices.

Masuku et al. (2023) investigated the relationship between land tenure systems, gender, and household food security in rural KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. They argued that gender discrimination and disparities in the distribution of land result in food insecurity within households in rural areas and stated that customary law acts as the primary factor that hinders women's access to land ownership and control.

The literature concerning women and property inheritance in customary laws elucidates various challenges and complexities. Customary laws, rooted in the cultural traditions of non-Western nations, frequently prioritise communal or ancestral rights over individual ones. This approach has a particular impact on women's property rights and access to land. These traditions usually deny women the same rights to property, control, and inheritance, upholding patriarchal standards that keep women in subordination both socially and economically. Efforts to reform or enforce legal protections for women often clash with entrenched traditional practices, complicating gender equality in property rights. Advocates, therefore, stress the need for nuanced strategies that uphold universal human rights values and recognise cultural diversity, calling for reforms that both respect pre-existing norms and confront discriminatory practices.

2.3.7 Legal Dimensions and Property Inheritance

Access to, use of, and acquisition or control of properties and other productive resources by women is critical for ensuring their rights to equality and a decent quality of life. These property rights economically empower women by providing them with opportunities to earn money, secure their place in society, and ensure their livelihoods. Gender equality in land and other productive assets and properties often faces many obstacles around the world, preventing women from fully exercising their rights. Therefore, the protection of women's rights requires specific legal measures.

The National Committee on the Status of Women (India) (1975) notes that the Hindu Succession Act of 1956 exempts the devolution of tenancy rights on

agricultural holdings under state law from the jurisdiction of the Act, which was intended to amend traditional Hindu law in which daughters were not acknowledged as heirs. As a result, practically every Indian state has implemented legislation giving female heirs a low priority among heirs to customary land rights in agricultural land or outright prohibiting women from inheriting such property.

Beninger (2010) points out that international law safeguards both the right of everyone to possess property and the equality of women. She quotes Article 17 of the International Declaration of Human Rights, stating that “everyone is entitled to hold property both alone and in collaboration with others.” She also addressed the Convention for the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (CEDAW), a global agreement that guarantees women’s equality and rights, including the ability to own property. Article 14 of CEDAW also mandates that all members should guarantee that men and women are treated equally in land, agrarian reform, and land resettlement schemes. Additionally, Article 15(2) of CEDAW states that women should have equal rights to administer property, and Article 16 of CEDAW protects women’s equal rights to ownership and enjoyment of property while they are married.

Mishra (2014) examines the Indian Succession Act, 1925 (ISA, 1925), which governs the majority of Christians and says that the ISA of 1925, which is based on patriarchal ideology, causes women to be treated unfairly in intestate succession. She also highlights the irony that the law discriminating against women in succession rights, enacted more than half a century ago, still exists today and argues that there is no conclusive reason to deny women equal rights. Her study examines the shortcomings of the ISA of 1925 regarding Christian women’s inheritance rights, discusses the legal transitions needed to grant these rights as highlighted in the Law Commission of India’s reports, and proposes amendments to the existing legal framework to ensure these rights are based on principles of rationality and fairness, emphasising that the ISA of 1925, which

governs intestate and testamentary succession, must evolve with societal changes over time.

Mishra (2015) observes that even after six decades of national independence and a constitution that guarantees the right to equality without discrimination based on sex and religion, the law relating to the transfer of properties through inheritance has not been decided in India, as India, with its inherent variation in personal laws owing to a patriarchal mindset, has resisted abandoning traditional notions in the formulation of its laws. However, she notes that the Himachal Pradesh High Court observed that tribal women could inherit property in a recent landmark decision. It has disregarded long-standing customary law that says only men are entitled to inherit their ancestors' property. Because laws must change over time for societies to advance and to protect women from social injustice, the judge ruled that daughters in the tribal areas of the State of Himachal Pradesh must inherit property in accordance with the Hindu Succession Act, 1956 and not according to traditions, further stating that while their culture may be distinct, its traditions must adhere to the constitutional concept.

Roy (2015), using state-level revisions to India's national inheritance legislation, examined the impact of improved female property inheritance rights on women's outcomes. However, despite the reforms providing for daughters to inherit equal interests in joint family property as sons, this did not happen in practice and had no impact on the reform on the likelihood of inheritance by women. Instead, findings show that parents appear to be compensating their daughters for such disinheritance by increasing their dowries or providing them with more education after the reform.

Almodóvar-Reteguis (2019) states that women continue to face legal impediments to access, own, and maintain assets across the world. In the *Women, Business, and the Law: A Decade of Reform Study*, she examined the Managing Assets indicator and looked at gender inequalities in property and inheritance law in 187 nations throughout the world. She observed that Europe

and Central Asia were the only regions where women enjoyed ownership over their assets, with nations such as Belgium, Denmark, France, Latvia, Luxembourg, and Sweden having the same rights as men. In comparison, the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia had the most stringent regulations, notably in the area of inheritance. This can be explained by the fact that in South Asia, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, and the Maldives don't really provide equal inheritance rights to both sons and daughters, as do all Middle Eastern and North African nations besides Malta.

Popoola et al. (2023) write that despite global initiatives and significant laws such as the Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (CEDAW), women in certain countries, especially those with patriarchal societies like that of Nigeria, continue to face barriers in obtaining and utilising land. They identified several factors, such as socio-cultural and gender norms, economic and financial constraints, religious beliefs, patriarchal authority and educational opportunities. Firdaus et al. (2024) also found that while legal frameworks promote women's role in community development and empowerment, deeply rooted patriarchal norms and systemic barriers like low education and resource scarcity continue to marginalise women from local governance and full political engagement.

Sharma (2024) stated that the evolution of property rights for Hindu women has transformed from traditional limitations to modern gender equality, greatly influenced by customs, colonial rule, and key legislative changes. At the beginning, ancient texts like the Manusmriti and traditions such as the Mitakshara system constrained women's rights by favouring males; however, the family unit offered some recognition for economic security. She further goes on to state that the British introduced new legal concepts, leading to early legislation such as the Hindu Widows Remarriage Act of 1856 and the Hindu Women's Rights to Property Act of 1937, which progressively improved women's status. The transformative Hindu Succession Act of 1956, and especially the significant amendment in 2005, ended the male dominance,

granting daughters equal coparcenary rights at birth in ancestral property just like sons.

Verma and Narwal (2024) emphasised that, despite legal reforms, particularly the Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act of 2005, which has made significant progress towards gender equality by granting daughters equal coparcenary rights, their actual implementation is hampered by persistent societal norms and practices. They also noted that although there are strong constitutional and international frameworks in place, women continue to face structural barriers such as deeply rooted patriarchal practices, social stigma, lack of legal information, and cultural pressure to freely forsake their inheritance rights.

Mittika (2025) critically explores the “Inherited Inequality” faced by Hindu women, who possess only a limited right over inherited property, and reveals deeply rooted gender biases within the inheritance system that restrict their authority over property owned. This limitation meant that a woman cannot be a “last full owner” or a “fresh stock of descent”, and upon her death, the property reverts to the heirs of the last male owner.

To achieve gender equality, women must have access to and control over property and productive resources, as highlighted by the literature on legal dimensions and property inheritance. To combat discriminatory practices ingrained in customary and religious laws, attempts are being made to guarantee women equal rights to inherit, own, and manage property through various legal frameworks and international accords, such as CEDAW. Studies do, however, point to enduring issues that continue to deny women their right to inherit, such as patriarchal interpretations of legislation like the Indian Succession Act of 1925. Though they also indicate continued resistance and the complexity of legal reforms, recent judicial developments, such as historic rulings in India that permit tribal women to inherit property under statutory laws rather than customs, signify progress. There are also differences in property rights throughout the world; in Europe, for example, there is more equality than in South Asia and some parts of Africa, where women are still

unable to own or manage property due to legislative restrictions or customary practices.

2.3.8 Women's Inheritance under MDGs and SDGs

Berg, Horan, and Patel (2010) emphasise that women's inheritance and property rights constitute one of the main areas of focus for women's movements in developing countries. According to the authors, strengthening women's legal rights in these areas is an important and effective way to reduce poverty and promote gender equality, as well as a critical vehicle for achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). They used two detailed case studies from Rwanda and Ethiopia to show how changes in the law and how they are enforced might affect the progress of the MDGs in developing countries. The MDGs are vital in achieving inclusive and sustainable development both internationally and locally, particularly in terms of poverty reduction and gender inequality (United Nations Development Fund for Women, 2008; Commission for Gender Equality-CGE, 2010). Similar views have been held by Grown et al. (2005), saying that there is growing interest in the accomplishment of women's rights to property inheritance after 1995. They underscore the crucial role of civil society, NGOs, and women's organisations in assisting women in asserting their land rights. However, Lambrou (2005) states that from a rural viewpoint, the MDGs are ambitious, and their achievement will require a collective and coordinated effort. In addressing the gender dimension of the MDGs, Ariffin (2004), CGE (2010), and the Organisation for economic co-operation and development (OECD) (2010) believe that the MDGs have significant gaps when it comes to tackling the issue of women's inequality. Moreover, meeting the practical and strategic gender needs of women, as well as reaching the MDG 3 goal of gender equality and their empowerment, would be difficult because Joseph (2002) believes that women's unequal status is rooted in social, economic, and political gender inequalities. OECD (2010) also expressed concerns that deep-seated gender inequities will continue to thwart any progress or movement toward all of the goals, not only MDG 3 on women's empowerment and gender inequality.

Fredman et al. (2016) observe that the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have not succeeded in establishing gender equality and women's empowerment. They believe that one of the main reasons the MDGs failed in terms of women's equality was their inability to address the deeply ingrained and interconnected issues that perpetuate women's inequality and their disregard for the many structural forces that contribute to and amplify disparities, and that the newly stated Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) represent an advancement over the MDGs. The challenge, according to the authors citing (UN Women, 2013), is how to best incorporate a transformative approach into the planning, implementation, and delivery of the specific targets so that the SDGs contribute to achieving gender equality and women's empowerment, and they write that this can be accomplished through the human rights framework, which holds significant and still underutilised potential to develop a transformative approach to the SDGs. The authors outline a four-dimensional transformative equality model (Fredman, 2011) and make the case for the further development of an SDGs-based human rights approach that seeks to achieve (1) ending the cycle of disadvantage; (2) promoting respect for human worth and dignity; (3) accommodating differences by initiating structural change; and (4) fostering political and social inclusion. They conclude by saying that the SDGs must address social services, family poverty, infrastructure, gender stereotypes in the home and society, gender-based violence, the provision of adequate sanitation, the restructuring of the labour market and the consultation of girl learners within this framework.

Mishra and Tripathi (2018) point out that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), also referred to as the Global Goals, are an international call for action to eradicate poverty and gender inequality, safeguard the environment, and promote peace and justice, among other priorities, to guarantee that everyone will live in peace and prosperity in the years to come. The SDGs are a comprehensive set of global goals that everyone aspires to achieve by 2030. Citing the work of the United Nations (2015), the SDGs strive to solve the most pressing global concerns by building on the successes of their

predecessors, the MDGs, and encourage cross-national cooperation to balance the three elements of sustainable development: economic growth, environmental sustainability, and social inclusion. The SDGs represent a diverse agenda for all nations to adopt in accordance with their own goals in addressing the underlying causes of poverty and bringing everyone together to create change that is advantageous for the world and for people (UNDP, 2016).

The literature on women's inheritance under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) emphasises how important it is to protect women's property rights in order to achieve gender equality and reduce poverty. Strengthening women's property and inheritance rights is crucial for achieving the MDGs, particularly in terms of eradicating poverty and enhancing gender equality. Critics, however, argue that the MDGs fall short in addressing the deeply ingrained systemic issues that fuel women's inequality. The SDGs, on the other hand, provide a more thorough and transformative framework, highlighting the necessity of using a human rights-based strategy to address several challenges, including violence, gender stereotypes, social services, and infrastructure. In addition, despite progress, ongoing gender disparities remain a significant impediment, underscoring the imperative for coordinated efforts to achieve comprehensive gender equality.

2.4 An Overview

In this chapter, a thorough review of available literature has been carried out in order to gain an insight into what aspects previous scholars have covered in their works and the arguments they have advanced. This, in turn, helped conceptualise the thematic areas to be covered, the theories to be used, and the methods to be followed, which allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the study and facilitated the identification and location of research gaps in existing literature.

Thus, in this chapter, the literature has been reviewed under three headings: a theoretical review, a methodological review, and a thematic review, which

have been summarised below with the help of three tables. The first table displays an overview of the theoretical perspectives reviewed, their postulates, and the proponents of the theory.

Table 2.1 An overview of the Theoretical Perspective

Theory	Postulate	Proponent
Gender Theory	1. A woman's gender affects her rights. 2. Patriarchal tradition limits women's inheritance rights. 3. Socio-cultural norms and perceptions reinforce gender biases. 4. Traditional informal norms classify women as second-class citizens.	Agarwal (1994), Hacker (2010), Rao (2011), Zhllima et al. (2021)
Kinship theory: Descent and Alliance	1. Principal lines of descent include multilateral, matrilineal, and patrilineal kinship systems. 2. Earliest form of Kinship organisation was patriarchal, ruled by eldest surviving male in the family. 3. Development of settled agriculture led to men exert more control over women leading to monogamy so that properties could pass on to his children. 4. Clan based ownership of property are symbolic. 5. Significance of property as a symbol of the family. 6. Interactions and connections built through marriage and the exchange of women between groups.	Maine (1861), Morgan (1877), Durkheim (1888a), Evans-Pritchard (1940), Fortes (1953), Brown and Sowayan (1977)

Symbolic Interactionism	1. All systems and interactions including family systems are assumed and expected to have conflict. 2. Relationship between symbols and interaction.	Eshleman (1981), Rank and LeLroy (1983)
Social Exchange	1. Exchange as the foundation of all human relationships. 2. Human relationship based on benefits and cost associated with resource exchange. 3. Human interaction in terms of exchange. 4. Solidarity develops when marital exchanges are fair. (Fair exchange). 5. Gender a central element in every social structure and social exchange theory works within that structure and Interaction among humans within a social structure is goal oriented rather than random	Chavanness (1901), Kelley (1959) Homans (1961), Blau (1964), Edward (1969), Scanzoni (1970), Osmond and Thorne (1993)
Conflict Perspective	1. Family conflict is the result of social groups deprived of material resources fighting to remedy the injustice. 2. Property considered as a scarce resource by men and women fighting for equal inheritance results in conflict. 3. Significant power differentiation of men and women. 4. Superimposition.	Frederick Engels (1884), Coser (1956), George Simmel (1956)

	5. Distributive Justice. 6. As long as scarcity exists conflict arises over the distribution of resources. 7. Men concentrated wealth in their own hands and instituted monogamy to ensure males could pass on his property to male child.	Dahrendorf (1959), Homans (1961), Lenski (1966), Engles (1970)
Human Rights-based Approach	1. Principle of non-discrimination in the enjoyment of rights based on sex and recognizing the right to property food and housing. 2. Principle of non-discriminatory right to livelihood. 3. To assist women in the identification of their rights as well as foster the development in their right to assert claims on property rights. 4. Stressed on human agencies, capabilities and entitlement as key factors in equality and development. 5. Capabilities approach -entitlements defined as rights with legal obligations to respect, protect, and fulfil rights.	UN General Assembly (1948), Hellum (2001), Hellum et al., (2005), Ikdahl et al. (2005), Koskinen (2005)

Here, the theoretical perspectives assert that traditional patriarchal practices restrict women's inheritance rights and that modern legal systems coexist with traditional informal regulations or customary laws, which are in conflict with or opposed by statutory formal laws. The theories also contend that matrilineal

and patrilineal kinship systems are the major lines of descent groups and that the first type of kinship organisation was patriarchal, with the eldest surviving male in the family reigning over the family. This arrangement resulted from the growth of pastoral and settled agriculture, which encouraged a vested interest in owning the workers' fruits. Therefore, to pass on his properties to his children, men began to take more control over women, eventually leading them to monogamy. As a result, family is made up of significant components such as kin, spouses, and children, and property ownership is based on kinship and clan, which creates a symbolic and financial link to the land and family assets.

The social exchange theory suggests that human relationships are based on benefits and costs associated with resource exchange and that humans interact in terms of exchange. Exchange is thus the foundation of all human relationships, and solidarity develops when marital exchanges are fair. However, exchanges are often unfair regarding property and gender, both of which are central elements in every social structure; social exchange theory operates within this framework. The symbolic interaction theory thus stresses the relationship between symbols and interaction and assumes and expects that all systems and interactions, including family systems, will experience conflict.

Conflict theory demonstrates that conflict takes a universal shape that is observed in all human relationships. Family conflict results from societal groupings seeking to remedy the injustice because men instituted monogamy to ensure that males could pass on their possessions to male children, destroying mothers' rights through it and accounting for the domestic servitude of women. Conflict results from men and women competing for an equal inheritance since property is seen as a limited resource, and conflict over resource distribution will continue to develop as long as there is a lack of resources. This issue is because women want distributive justice over resources, while men place their position above women. This results in major power differences and conflict. Thus, by emphasising the principle of non-discrimination in enjoying rights based on sex and recognising the rights to property, food, and housing, the human rights approach aimed to help women identify their rights and develop

their ability to assert claims regarding property rights. The human rights approach also placed a strong emphasis on humans' non-discriminatory right to a living, their capabilities, and entitlements. This strategy would help women identify their rights and entitlements and promote the growth of their right to make claims on property and inheritance, which is actually their fundamental human right. Thus, to create effective answers to the issues faced by women in their struggle against discrimination in property inheritance rights, it is essential to adopt a human rights-based approach as a framework.

Next, table provides an overview of the authors, the methods they have employed, their purpose, and their subject affiliations.

Table 2.2 An overview of the methodological review

Methods used	Authors	Purpose	Affiliation
Case study	Daley and Englert (2010), Casari and Lisciandra (2014), Toktas and O'neil (2013)	1. To explore the relationship between property ownership, inheritance, and women's empowerment. 2. To study economic factors behind the process of women's inheritance rights erosion. 3. Explore practical methods for securing land rights for women.	Economics (5)
Interview Schedule	Rekha and Yaseen (2012), Mishra and	1. 1. To learn about women's attitudes toward property and the inheritance process. 2. To examine the impacts	Gender Studies (3)

	Sam (2016), Toktas and O'neil (2013), O'Neil, and Toktas (2017)	of land ownership. 3. To analyse women's access to property. 4. Measures taken to revise the existing law and policies to eradicate discrimination.	Public Administration (2) Political Science (1) Peace, Conflict and Management Studies (1) Human Rights Consultant (1)
Questionnaire	Rai (2016), Rekha and Yaseen (2012)	1. To understand the women's perspective and perceptions on property inheritance. 2. To identify measures taken to revise the existing law and policies to eradicate discrimination.	
Descriptive and Exploratory, Comparative, Qualitative Analysis and Focus Group Discussion	Rekha and Yaseen (2012), Rai (2016), O'Neil and Toktas (2017), Kola (2018), Shil and Jangir (2021)	1. To know the perception of tribal women in relation to property inheritance laws. 2. Comparative analysis of different communities. 3. To examine the legal framework behind property rights and inheritance and to synthesise the findings. 4. To examine the role of gender in gaining access to property inheritance	Social Work (1)

		rights.	
Snowball Technique	Toktas and O'neil (2013), Meinzen-Dick and Quisumbing et al., (2019)	1. Interviewees were contacted using the snowballing technique. 2. To find literature by snowballing sources from the reference lists.	
Stratified Sampling	Mishra and Sam (2016)	1. To sample respondents based on household structures and occupation.	

The literature reviewed reveals that the scholars and researchers in their work have used a descriptive and exploratory approach and applied a qualitative research design in their study. The researchers also collected data using questionnaires and structured interviews and the case study method in field research. Firstly, they considered institutional changes over a very long-time span, which enabled them to capture factors that shaped human societies. Secondly, the scholars investigated not only a single case study but a panel of cases; through this, the researchers explored the relationship between property ownership, inheritance, and women's empowerment and the factors behind the process of women's inheritance rights erosion. They also conducted interviews about inheritance patterns to better understand the complicated relationship between property and women's empowerment, and focused on analysing the opinions of government officials on the property rights of women and the measures they have taken to revise the existing law and policies to eradicate discrimination against women in the inheritance of properties. Also, to learn more about women's attitudes toward property and the inheritance process, field research was undertaken, which included in-depth interviews, and respondents were contacted using the snowball technique, questionnaires, in-

depth interviews and participant observation to examine the impacts of land ownership.

Focus Group Discussions were utilised to discuss the role of gender in gaining access to property rights and inheritance among women in general and to discover how property ownership affects their income and position in the household, and a comparative analysis of different communities was also undertaken. Lastly, with the respondents' permission, the researchers taped the interviews and then transcribed, coded, and analysed them using qualitative research methods. However, although the methodology of studying kinship, inheritance, family and households falls under sociology and anthropology, the literature covered did not find its references, but sociological and anthropological methodologies are found to have been covered in their research, like case studies, interviews, questionnaires, descriptive and exploratory, comparative and qualitative analysis and focus group discussions. Therefore, a sociological study is needed. The last Table gives an overview of the thematic reviews that have been done for the study.

Table 2.3 Overview of the thematic review

Theme	Authors	Themes emphasized	Authors Affiliation
Property Rights and Gender	Agarwal (1994), Meinzen-Dick et al. (1997), Steinzor (2003), Deere and Doos	1. Link between gender subordination and property. 2. Gender analysis of resource rights. 3. Property inheritances are influenced by cultural, social, political, and legal variables. 4. Property ownership as a way to improve women's status. 5. Legal equality alone may not prevent gender differences in	Gender studies (3) Policy Researcher (2) Development

	(2006), Varley (2007), Baruah (2007), Toktas and O'neil (2013), Rabenhorst and Bean (2016), Djurfeldt (2020), Feyertag et al. (2021)	ownership. 6. Explore the gendered aspects of land tenure and land property rights. 7. How do women receive inheritance? 8. How gender equality in property rights is related to economic development. 9. Gender-based discrimination in light of reforms made. 10. How does gender affect the perceived security of property rights.	Studies (2) Human Geography (1) Gender studies (1) Political Science (1)
Women and Land ownership	Katz and Chamorro (2003), Deere et al. (2005), Giovarelli (2006), Deere and Doss (2006), Shrestha (2009), Basnet (2012), Agarwal et al., (2021),	1. Land ownership varies by women's age, education, and household headship. 2. Women without brothers are more likely to inherit land. 3. Owning land boosts women's economic, social, and political power. 4. Men's landholdings are nearly three times more valuable. 5. Land authority strengthens women's agency and status. 6. Empowerment is closely tied to land entitlement. 7. Few women own land and who they are matters.	Economist (2) Development Studies (2) Gender studies (2) Women's land right attorney (1)

	Ansary and Ramya (2024), Mehpara and Kumar (2025)	8. Patriarchal norms limit women's property rights. 9. Land ownership is key to women's empowerment.	
Female Bargaining Power	Agarwal (1997), Kabeer (1999), Panda and Agarwal (2005), Mardon (2005) Bhatla, Chakraborty and Duvvury (2006), Datta (2006) Nagarajan et al., (2010), Adam et al., (2011), Hossain and Nikolov (2021), Gupta (2022)	1. Property provides security and visible escape opportunities. 2. Land provides increased women's financial security and household bargaining power. 3. Women with immovable property suffer lower risk of marital violence. 4. Women's land rights associated with higher decision-making. 5. Acts as protection from domestic violence. 6. A feeling of empowerment in their fight against repression. 7. Reform of inheritance laws had a positive effect on girls' education. 8. Leads to higher education, better health, less discrimination and suicide. 9. Led to an increase in female education, labour supply, and autonomy. 10. Increases the autonomy of women.	Economist (8) Gender studies (2)

Family Conflict over Inheritance of Properties by Women	Titus et al. (1979), Lawton et al. (1994), Griffiths (2002), Piketty (2014), Izuhara and Koppe (2019)	1. Studied the dynamics of family inheritance disputes. 2. Families are sources of both solidarity and conflict. 3. Siblings in Dispute over Inheritance. 4. Assets acquired through intergenerational transfer have become a major source of social stratification between families. 5. Inheritance can lead to family unrest, disagreements, dissatisfaction and the expression or exacerbation of tensions.	Family studies (1) Psychologist (1) Sociologist (1) Anthropologist (1) Economist (1) Policy Studies (1) Social work (1)
Barriers to women's property Inheritance	Agarwal (1994), Giovarelli (2006), Karadag (2006), Ditz (2014), Rawal and Agrawal (2016), Richardson et al. (2018), Bosuben	1. Gender norms and traditions restrict women's land rights. 2. Marriage customs, dowry, and polygamy hinder ownership. 3. Land is often viewed as a male entitlement. 4. Inheritance is shaped by kinship ties. 5. Patriarchy and conservative setups remain strong barriers. 6. Women face more cultural hurdles than men. 7. Illiteracy and poverty limit women's access to land. 8. Equality laws clash with	Economist (3) Women's Land rights attorney (2) Historian (1) Humanitarian (1) Public Policy

	(2018), Genicot and Hernandez-de- Benito (2022), Giovarelli (2011)	discriminatory customs. 9. Legal gaps and weak enforcement persist.	(1) Journalist (1) Anthropologist (1)
Women and Property Inheritance in Customary Laws	Giovarelli (2006), Krishna (2005), Joireman (2008), Rural Development Institute (2009), Daley and Englert (2010), Agnes and Ghosh (2012), Dwidhiti (2018), Masuku et al. (2023)	1. Cultural norms and law, discriminatory legislation limits women's land rights. 2. Customary rules influence women's social and economic status. 3. Social and customary regulations prevent women's legal participation. 4. Customary laws deny equitable property rights making formal laws meaningless. 5. A better strategy is to update and reform existing customs rather than replace them. 6. Women always compromise their rights in society due to imposed practices and customs. 7. Reforming customary traditions would likely cause extreme opposition and agitation from multiple quarters. 8. Gender discrimination results in food insecurity.	Women's land rights attorney (1) Gender Studies (3) Political Science (1) Research Centre (1) African studies (1) Advocate (2) Development Studies (1)

Legal Dimensions and Property Inheritance	NCSW (India) and ICSSR (1975), Beninger (2010), Mishra (2014), Mishra (2015), Roy (2015), Almodovar-Reteguis (2019), Popoola et al. (2023) Sharma (2024) Verma and Narwal (2024), Mittika (2025)	1. Indian states' legislation does not priorities female heirs due to customary laws. 2. International law supports property rights and gender equality. 3. ISA 1925 needs reform for fairness and inclusion. 4. Culture and traditions must adhere to the constitutional concept. 5. Examine the impact of improved female property inheritance rights on women's outcomes. 6. Women continue to face legal impediments to access, own, and maintain assets under property and inheritance law. 7. Despite legal reforms, patriarchy becomes a barrier. 8. Male dominance and granting equal rights to daughters. 9. Inherited Inequality. 10. Despite legal reforms, societal norms and practices still dominate women's inheritance.	Research centre (2) Lawyer (1) Legal analyst (1) Development economics (1) Private sector Development specialist (1) Management (1)
Women's Inheritance under MDGs and	Lambrou (2005), Berg et al.	1. Strengthening women's legal rights to inheritance and property is a main focus area. 2. MDGs are ambitious, and their	Legal researcher (1)

SDGs	(2010),	achievement will require a collective and coordinated effort. Of MDGs.	
	OECD (2010)		
	UN Women (2013),	3. MDGs have significant gaps in tackling women's inequality; deep-seated gender inequities will thwart progress toward all goals.	Gender analyst (1)
	Fredman et al. (2016),		
	UNDP (2016)	4. MDGs failed on women's equality due to their inability to address deeply ingrained, interconnected issues and disregard for structural forces that amplify disparities.	International Organization (2)
	Mishra and Tripathi (2018)	5. Newly stated Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) represent an advancement over the MDGs.	Human Rights lawyer (1)
		6. SDGs strive to solve pressing global concerns by building on MDGs' successes.	Human Rights Activist (1)
		7. SDGs represent a diverse agenda in addressing the underlying causes of poverty and creating change that is beneficial for the world and for people.	Geography (1)
			Sanskrit (1)
			UN Agency (1)

In the thematic review of property rights and gender, the scholars found that there is a persistent gap between women's legal rights and their actual ownership of land, and despite considerable progress, males still own and manage the major portion of properties. Thus, the scholars stressed the

connection between gender inequality and control over property, finding that a lack of property and inheritance rights for women is influenced by various cultural, social, political, and legal factors; they suggested that policies must address these gender inequities. The scholar also writes that the implementation of statutory law was difficult due to the prevalence of customary norms and traditions, legal pluralism, a lack of adequate legal infrastructure, low awareness, and limited administrative and technical capacity. They therefore stress the importance of civil society in promoting and supporting women's land rights but note that, with a few notable exceptions, most organisations have demonstrated reluctance to engage in the difficulties of having to address issues of land and property for women, particularly delicate in a country like India with a strong patriarchal culture and religious or cultural laws that affect and 'normalise' inequalities.

In women and land ownership, the scholars writes that a woman's age, education, and headship of the household were all related to the amount of land she owned and notes that economic power and the capacity to negotiate inside the home are among the main advantages brought about by land ownership and its control. Women's authority over land affords them economic, social, and political clout, and women who have greater control over land are less likely to experience economic vulnerabilities. Thus, the focus was laid on the linkage between empowerment and women's land entitlement, and in doing so, socio-cultural and economic factors that inhibit or contribute to women's entitlement to land.

With the ownership of land and properties, women attain certain bargaining powers. The scholars asserts that property provides certain security and visible escape opportunities, acting as a deterrent to marital violence, increases a women's financial security and strengthening their household bargaining power allowing women to have more control over decisions that affect their lives, such as childbearing, reduces their discrimination, increases rates of autonomous decision-making, increases resistance to domestic violence, gives them a feeling of empowerment, encourages them in their fight against

repression and creates numerous opportunities for their well-being. Women's equality in rights thus acts as a powerful policy tool for empowerment. However, some pointed out that more suicides and wife beatings occurred as a result of the right to own, which scholars ascribe to increased disputes over property within the family.

Women who inherit properties or fight for the right to inherit them often create conflict with their family and society. Conflicts occur because of the impossibility of achieving fairness by all heirs' standards, as well as the impossibility of dividing property and assets and real estate equally, thereby shattering kinship relationships, particularly between adult siblings. Focusing on women and inheritance meant taking a closer look at authority relations within patriarchal families, often resulting in extreme resistance and ending in conflict. Thus, conflict between siblings or men over inheritance is dependent on a framework in which their claims are moulded by prevailing norms that uphold sources of male power and authority. Therefore, women fighting for inheritance can lead to family unrest, disagreements, and dissatisfaction and can also serve as a platform for the expression or exacerbation of tensions that already exist in families.

Women confront numerous obstacles in exercising their rights to access, own, and control land and property and face several barriers to inheriting properties. While there are an increasing number of modern laws that grant daughters' inheritance rights, the marriage process and traditional patrilineal customs have generally stayed untouched; thus, gender ideologies, or ideas and assumptions about a gender's expected traits, and the prevalence of traditional attitudes and practices make it difficult for women to obtain property rights. The hurdles imposed by customs around marriage, divorce, bride price or dowry, and polygamy prevent women from owning land or having rights that would allow them to do so, and even when women did inherit properties, male family members-maintained authority over them. Patriarchy and conservative social setups have been identified as one persistent barrier to women's land

ownership, and cultural practices, illiteracy, and poor socioeconomic standing are the main causes of restrictions on women's ability to own or inherit land.

From the literature reviewed, when it comes to land or property ownership, customary law and the complex status of women are two significant barriers to their property rights, and even though formal legislation may allow women the right to inherit properties, in the face of customary laws, it does not recognise equitable property rights for women, leaving formal laws entirely meaningless, severely limiting a woman's right to inherit. The scholars thus note that customary laws need to be altered to comply with constitutional equality obligations if they have been defined in a way that prevents women from having access to land or from pursuing title.

Property inheritance laws within a society or community are primarily influenced by personal laws rooted in religion, which typically affect women's ability to inherit property and rarely provide equal inheritance rights for both men and women. When it comes to international law, it safeguards the right of everyone to possess property and the equality of women. Article 17 of the International Declaration of Human Rights states that "everyone is entitled to hold property both alone and in collaboration with others." Article 14 of CEDAW also mandates that all members should guarantee that men and women are treated equally in land, agrarian reform, and land resettlement schemes. Additionally, Article 15(2) states that women should have equal rights to "administer property". In terms of Indian law, there is still no codified or uniform law relating to the transfer of properties through inheritance, as India, owing to a patriarchal mindset, has its inherent variation in personal laws.

Different international organisations, such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), have been working for women's equal right to inheritance. Women's inheritance and property rights constitute one of the main areas of focus for women's movements in developing countries and are an important and effective way to

reduce poverty and promote gender equality, as well as a critical vehicle for achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) states that the MDGs are vital in achieving inclusive and sustainable development both internationally and locally, particularly in terms of poverty reduction and gender inequality. However, from a rural viewpoint, the MDGs are ambitious, and their achievement will require a collective and coordinated effort. Moreover, meeting the MDG 3 goal of gender equality and their empowerment would be difficult because women's unequal status is rooted in social, economic, and political gender inequalities. Thus, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have not succeeded in establishing gender equality and women's empowerment, and the newly stated Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) represent advancement over the MDGs. The SDGs are a comprehensive set of global goals that everyone is determined to achieve by the year 2030, building on the successes of their predecessors, the MDGs, in addressing the underlying causes of poverty and bringing everyone together to create change that is favourable for the world and for people.

In conclusion, for the literature review, a total of 237 pieces of literature have been reviewed, of which 61 were before the year 2000, 80 were between the years 2001 and 2010, and 96 were from the years 2011 to 2025. Moreover, the literature review revealed that economics, gender studies, public administration, and political science accounted for the majority of the authors and scholars. A few of them belonged to human rights consultants, social workers, policy researchers, development studies scholars, journalists, advocates, and international organisations. In addition, sociologists and anthropologists accounted for only a small portion of the literature's authors. The present study is basically a sociological and anthropological study, but since the literature reviewed was mostly from economists and other perspectives, there is a need to study "Property Rights of Ao Naga Women" from a sociological perspective.

Furthermore, the literature review was not an easy task; much time was spent trying to uncover and locate relevant literature about the study. Most of the reviewed literature came from online sources, including journal publications, articles, and project works. Moreover, finding and locating the literature and publications online was made easier after consulting the supervisor, and it was suggested to try typing in keywords in the search box, finding the relevant ones, and then going through the reference list provided by the author. This procedure provided countless opportunities to find pertinent literature.

The task of downloading the literature presented another challenge. Many relevant articles and publications were found but could not be downloaded due to paywalls or other barriers. However, the supervisor's guidance, which included hands-on experience in accessing files that required payment, proved to be extremely beneficial. One notable example is the website Sci-Hub, which was previously unknown to the researcher and allows users to download literature using the DOI of articles or publications.

After downloading the literature, a significant amount of time was spent on a single article or publication, attempting to understand what the author was trying to say. Literature was downloaded, thinking it would be relevant based on the titles, but after going through it, it was discovered to be useless and not worth reviewing or relevant to the study and was thus discarded as irrelevant in contextualising the study. However, during the cross-checking process with the supervisor, we identified some distinct relevance that was incorporated into the literature review.

To summaries, "It is difficult to start the work. However, once started, it is like diving into a jungle, opening up never-ending passages to various sources and ways." This observation is accurate, as the researcher initially struggled to start the literature review and locate relevant sources; however, once they engaged with a single piece of literature, numerous additional sources and avenues for exploration emerged.

2.5 Research Gap and Rationale for the Study

The literature reviewed reveals that several studies have been undertaken on the issue of gender inequality and property inheritance rights, with the help of various methodologies, and reveals that property inheritance depends on the type of households and families and is passed down mostly through the male kin. Substantial gender gaps exist in land ownership and inheritance; scholars indicate that women's gender identity negatively affects their property rights and that gender-based discrepancies in inheritance occur across various places and societies. Moreover, women's property inheritances are heavily influenced by patriarchy and customary laws, which deny them equal property rights. But, although substantial works are available by scholars on the system of property inheritance, gender and customary laws, research dealing with women and property inheritance rights of the Ao Nagas is still at a nascent stage. From a gendered perspective, few studies have empirically analysed the influence of customary laws on property inheritance.

When it comes to exercising their rights to own and inherit property, Ao women face numerous obstacles. Even though the Constitution guarantees equal rights to men and women, customary laws often discriminate against women, overriding constitutional provisions. Article 19(f) of the Indian Constitution guarantees the property right, but Article 371(A), which is only for Nagaland, lets customary practices take precedence. Thus, despite the provisions of the Indian Constitution, customary laws are paramount among the tribals, and consequently, Ao customs continue to dictate property inheritance, barring women from inheritance rights.

Patriarchal cultural traditions also significantly restrict women's access to land and property among the Aos. Institutional obstacles, including insufficient knowledge and comprehension, impede women from fully exercising their property rights. Accordingly, the present study aims to investigate the socio-cultural, structural, legal, administrative, and institutional barriers that prevent women in the Ao society from accessing and owning or inheriting resources.

Moreover, given the patriarchal nature of Ao society, the study will explore whether women in Ao society face similar challenges or fears in expressing their views and opinions as in other patriarchal societies.

The study also seeks to analyse the connections between property inheritance rights and the social, institutional, and ideological practices influencing inheritance practices among the Ao Nagas. It will examine whether there is a preference for males in traditional inheritance practices within Ao society and explore the reasons behind such preferences. Furthermore, understanding the inheritance practices of the Ao society requires a gendered approach. The research will explore gender disparities in land and property ownership, investigating whether inheritance practices are governed by traditional customary laws or official legal systems, and whether changes or reforms can be implemented in the traditional and culturally dominant inheritance practices of patriarchal Ao society. In this regard, the following research gap arises:

1. It would be important to uncover the process of property inheritance among the Ao Nagas.
2. It is crucial to document and discuss the structural and dynamic variables that undermine the property rights of Ao Naga women.
3. There is a need to examine the specific social, economic, political, and cultural factors that women face when accessing and inheriting property.
4. To have a better understanding of how traditional customary norms take precedence over constitutional provisions on gender equality and property rights.
5. Research is needed to assess to what extent deeply rooted customary practices are resistant to change.
6. To identify if there are any possibilities for legal and cultural reforms in the traditional inheritance practices to ensure equality.
7. While numerous studies have been carried out to understand the inheritance practices in general, there appears to be a dearth of studies to understand how Ao women perceive the prevailing inheritance practice.

8. Gender inequality as a phenomenon is well-known to all, as well as widespread. Few studies have empirically analysed women and property inheritance rights in the Ao society. The literature reviewed included very few works on Ao literature and lacked sociological perspectives; therefore, addressing this gap would enrich the existing body of literature.

Thus, this study aims to provide a research-based perspective by addressing these gaps, improving knowledge regarding women's property inheritance rights in Ao Naga society, and formulating strategies to promote gender equality and women's empowerment in this context.

2.6 Research Questions

After identifying the research gap through the literature review, the following research questions emerge:

1. How is the property inheritance system practiced in the Ao Naga community?
2. What rights do Ao women have when it comes to inheritance, and how does it affect their socio-economic profile?
3. What are the structural and dynamic factors that prevent Ao Naga women from inheriting property?
4. How do societal norms and customary practices impede women's access to property inheritance in Ao society?
5. Does the status of Ao women in terms of property ownership differ between developed and underdeveloped villages?
6. How do Ao Naga women perceive the prevailing inheritance practices?
7. Are there any possibilities for legal and cultural reforms in the traditional inheritance practices to ensure gender equality?
8. What efforts have been made within the Ao society to enhance women's rights to property inheritance?

Following the literature review, the next chapter delves into the research methodology, explaining the design, approach, and procedures implemented in this study.

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Chapter III

Methodological Framework

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Chapter III

Methodological Framework

3.0 Introduction

Research, defined as “a careful or critical inquiry or examination in seeking facts or principles; a diligent investigation to ascertain something” (Woody, 1927), is a scientific and systematic pursuit of relevant information on a specific topic. This pursuit aims to understand, explain, and critically examine observable realities, ultimately seeking to uncover truth and new facts. Through scientific investigation, research drives the advancement of knowledge and aids in problem-solving, developing new theories, and testing hypotheses. A well-structured research methodology is crucial for effectively achieving these objectives. Methodology outlines the plan, procedures, and methods used in research, guiding the entire process (Nayak & Singh, 2021). It includes strategies or a plan of action that links methods with outcomes for finding, selecting, processing, and analysing information to ensure the study’s validity and reliability. Thus, research methods refer to the specific tools and techniques used to gather, interpret, and analyse data, which ultimately help researchers draw useful conclusions (Bhaskar & Manjuladevi, 2016).

This third chapter presents the research methodology employed, detailing the components and procedures involved in conducting the study. The research methods explicitly cover the research objectives, the sampling process, exclusion and inclusion criteria, data collection methods, and justifications for the chosen research design and sources of data. The present chapter also emphasises the pilot study, research experiences, and insights from fieldwork, as well as the research ethics followed and the limitations faced. Fundamentally, it addresses two central questions: How was the information gathered? And what method was used to gather it? Overall, this chapter outlines the methodological approach taken to conduct the research.

3.1 The Objectives of the Study

Taking into consideration the concluding section of the preceding chapter on the review of literature, where the rationale and research gaps were identified, and to answer the research questions that have come up, the objectives of the study are the following:

1. To understand the nature of inheritance of Ao Naga women.
2. To analyse the socio-economic profile of women in the Ao society.
3. To examine and compare the status of Ao women in developed and underdeveloped villages in terms of property ownership.
4. To study the factors that act as barriers and impede women's access to inheritance of properties.
5. To examine the societal efforts enhancing women's standing on property inheritance.

3.2 Research Design

A research design serves as the framework or plan for a study, guiding data collection and analysis. More specifically, it acts as a conceptual blueprint that outlines the collection, measurement, and analysis of data, ultimately providing a structured approach to answering the research question (Akhtar, 2016). Basically, it entails organising the research process to align with the study's objectives while considering time, resources, and data availability. Ultimately, the research design determines the type of study: descriptive, exploratory, correlational, semi-experimental, experimental, or otherwise, balancing the study's goals with practical constraints to ensure efficiency and relevance.

For this research, a descriptive-cum-exploratory and comparative research design has been employed. Subsequently, a mixed-method approach has been adopted in which, while the study is largely qualitative, need-based quantitative data has been incorporated for the study.

Descriptive studies seek to provide a comprehensive understanding of phenomena, situations, and events as they naturally occur, creating an overall

‘picture’ of a population or phenomenon (Rubin & Babbie, 1997). In the context of this study, the descriptive approach was employed to understand and interpret the inheritance practices of the Ao Nagas. By examining the traditions and practices related to inheritance, this study deepened the understanding of the inheritance customs, rights and practices within the Ao Naga community. Ultimately, this approach allowed for an in-depth description and interpretation of the Ao Naga inheritance practice, enabling greater insight into the cultural, social, and legal aspects of inheritance in Ao Naga society.

In addition to the descriptive design, this study also incorporates an exploratory research approach. Exploratory research is a study that seeks to answer a question or investigate a phenomenon (Singh, 2021). Within this context, the exploratory approach specifically examined the property inheritance rights of Ao Naga women in order to explore their perceptions of the prevailing inheritance practices, shedding light on how they view the prevailing practice and its impact on their rights and status. This research seeks to understand their experiences, as well as their perspectives on whether the traditional practices are fair and equitable or require reform, providing a more comprehensive understanding of both the practices and the lived experiences of women within their cultural context.

Furthermore, the study employed a comparative research design, a strategy that systematically compares two or more groups, cases, or phenomena to identify similarities and differences (Pennings & Keman, 2020). Specifically, the comparative analysis examined the differences between developed and underdeveloped villages within the Ao Naga community. By doing so, this approach offered instructive information about the differences in thoughts, perspectives, perceptions, and experiences of inheritance rights among Ao Naga women across varying village contexts. Ultimately, the study tried to provide a more in-depth understanding of how inheritance practices function in Ao society and examine whether socio-economic conditions influence the inheritance practices.

When it comes to the methods, the study employed both qualitative and quantitative approaches through a mixed-method design to achieve a more profound understanding of the Ao Naga inheritance practice by integrating numerical data with in-depth qualitative insights. By using these methods simultaneously, the study enabled a comprehensive analysis by merging quantitative data with contextual understanding (Yauch & Steudel, 2003). The quantitative data highlighted the respondents' perspectives, which revealed their general outlook on the prevailing inheritance practice. Qualitative data, on the other hand, went deeper and found out why people believe what they do. This gave a more complete picture of the cultural, social, and personal factors that shape their views. This combination enabled the study to not only capture broad patterns of thoughts and opinions but also explore the underlying reasons for these views within the Ao Naga community. These methods worked together to give a full picture of both the statistical and individual elements of inheritance practices, with a focus on the property rights of Ao Naga women.

3.3 Operationalisation of Concepts

Operationalisation of concepts refers to the process of defining abstract theoretical concepts in measurable and observable terms within a particular study so that researchers can empirically study the concepts (Rao & Reddy, 2013). It involves translating the “theoretical, conceptual variable of interest into a series of specific processes or procedures that determine the variable’s meaning in a given study” (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007). In this research, key concepts such as property, inheritance, customary laws, Ao women, and gender are defined and operationalised as follows:

Property: All assets belonging to an individual or a group of individuals, including land, shares, buildings, and ornaments, are referred to as property. For this study, however, ‘property’ specifically refers to immovable land alone. Property is further categorised into:

- **Ancestral Property:** Clan land that has been handed down through generations
- **Acquired Property:** Land that is purchased using one's own resources.
- **Inherited Property:** Land received from one's paternal ancestors, both ancestral and acquired.
- **Communal Property:** Land that is collectively owned by a clan or the whole village, shared and used communally.

Inheritance: Inheritance is the practice of transferring private property, titles, debts, entitlements, rights, duties, and obligations to heirs upon an individual's death. The heir is the person legally entitled to receive a share of the deceased relative's property. In this case, inheritance means that the son or male relative of the dead father receives his clan's land.

Customary Law: Customary laws are the unwritten traditional norms and practices that hold the force of law and govern the ownership and inheritance rights within Ao Naga society. They have been handed down orally and practiced consistently without any change.

Ao women: 'Ao women' refers to the women belonging to the Ao Naga ethnic tribal group, primarily residing in the Mokokchung District of Nagaland. They have been chosen specifically for this study to examine their property inheritance rights and experiences within the context of Ao Naga society.

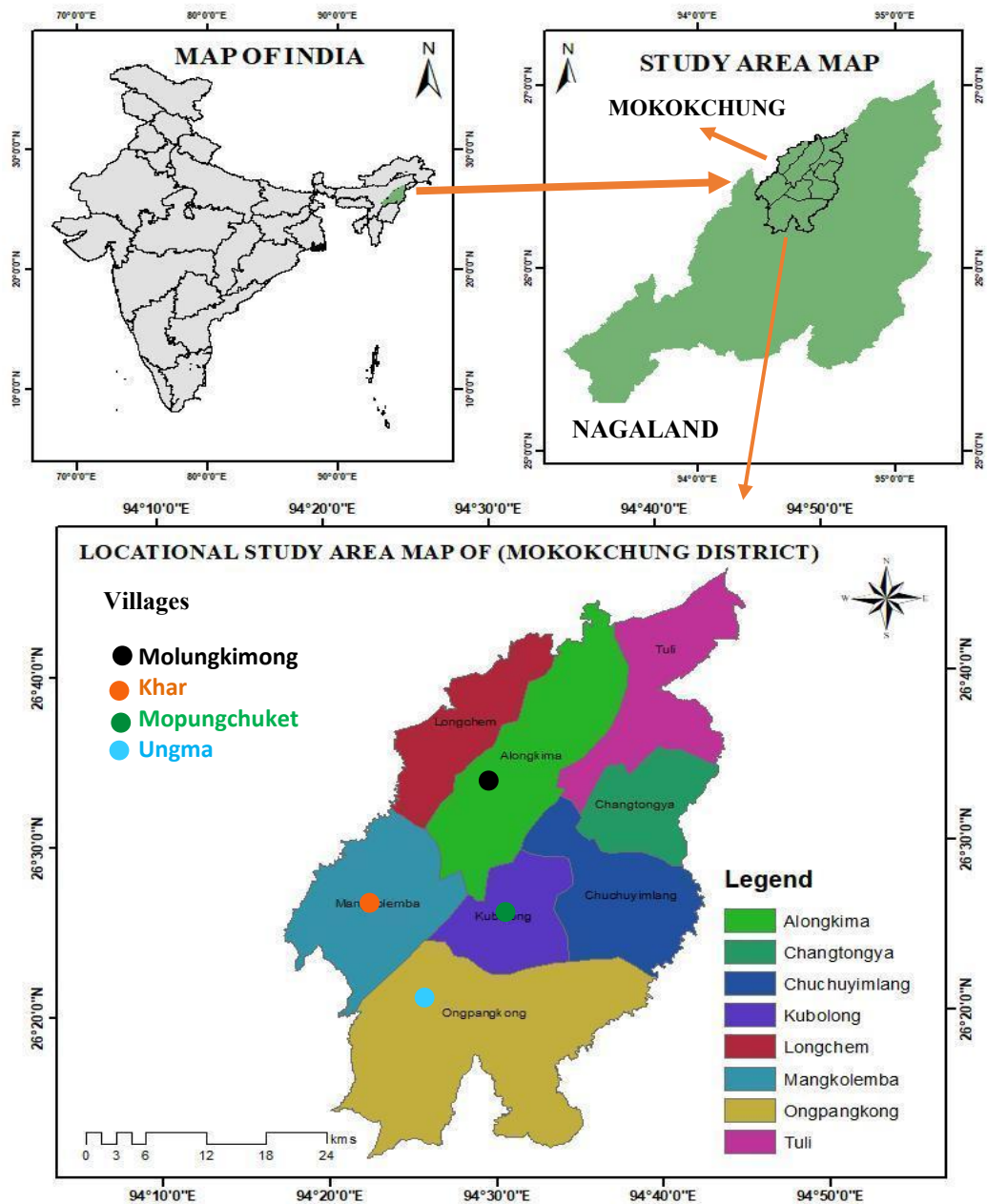
Gender: The term refers to the social and cultural roles, behaviours, and expectations associated with being male or female in Ao Naga society that influence access to property and power.

3.4 Universe and Sample

The term 'universe' is the total number of items in any field of inquiry, while 'sample' is the subject of items about which information is desired (Kothari & Garg, 2024). For the study, the Mokokchung district has been selected as the

universe. It is a district in Nagaland, established on December 1, 1957, and is culturally regarded as the central region inhabited by the Ao Naga tribe.

Fig. 3.1 Map of Nagaland



Source Author

Nagaland is a landlocked state that shares a 215-kilometre international border with Myanmar in its eastern part. Meanwhile, the northern, western, and southern parts mostly share national borders with Arunachal Pradesh, Assam,

and Manipur. The name of the state is derived from the term 'Naga' (which has unclear origins but was used to refer to the Naga people by the British) and 'land' (area), meaning the Land of the Nagas. The capital of Nagaland is Kohima, while Dimapur is generally considered the biggest commercial hub and most populous city. According to the 2011 census, Nagaland has a total population of 1,978,502. Among them, 1,024,649 are males and about 953,853 are females. Nagaland is home to 17 major tribes dwelling in 17 administrative districts, among which the Ao Naga tribe resides in the district of Mokokchung (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, 2011).

Mokokchung District, situated in the northern region of the state, was one of the initial three districts during the formation of Nagaland as a state. Mokokchung, as a district, is divided into four subdivisions, namely Mokokchung, Tuli, Mangkolemba and Changtongya. These four subdivisions are further subdivided into nine administrative circles with different villages under them, and Mokokchung town is the district's main administrative headquarters. As per the 2011 census of India, Mokokchung had a population of 194,622 in 2011, out of which 101,092 are male and 93,530 are female, with a sex ratio of 925 females for every 1000 males and a literacy rate of 91.6 per cent (Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, 2011).

In figure 3.1, the nine administrative circles are highlighted, from which Ongpangkong, Kubolong, Mangkolemba and Alongkima subdivisions have been earmarked for this study.

For the selection of the sample, the study employed a non-probability and purposive sampling technique to select a total of 50 households from 4 villages, selected through a multi-staged quota sampling process, leading to a total sample of 200 households to carry out a household survey that broadly represents the universe of the study.

From the four subdivisions, in the first stage, based on the highest rural population, nearest to District Headquarters and based on availability/non-availability of health and educational infrastructures, water supply and

sanitation, connectivity and other service sector indicators as per the 2011 Census, two subdivisions were selected and classified into a developed and an underdeveloped subdivision. In the second stage, using the same criteria, four administrative circles were identified from the two selected subdivisions to represent them as developed and underdeveloped administrative circles. On the third stage, four villages were identified, one from each administrative circle, based on the same criteria and were classified as developed and underdeveloped villages. Finally, in the fourth stage, 50 households were purposively selected from the identified villages to conduct interviews using a structured interview schedule.

Table 3.1. Depicting the selection of 2 subdivisions, 4 administrative circles and 4 villages.

4 sub-divisions			
Mokokchung	Tuli	Mangkolemba	Changtongya
2 sub-divisions			
Mokokchung (Developed)		Mangkolemba (Underdeveloped)	
4 administrative circles			
1. Ongpangkong	2. Kubolong	3. Mangkolemba	4. Alongkima
4 Villages			
1. Ungma	2. Mopungchuket	3. Khar	4. Molungkimong

The two subdivisions selected in the first stage were Mokokchung and Mangkolemba, with Mokokchung classified as the developed subdivision and Mangkolemba as the underdeveloped one. In the second stage, the four administrative circles from the selected subdivisions were Ongpangkong, Kubolong, Mangkolemba, and Alongkima. Ongpangkong and Kubolong represented the developed sub-division (Mokokchung), while Mangkolemba and Alongkima represented the underdeveloped sub-division (Mangkolemba). Then, in the third stage, one village was selected from each administrative circle:

1. Ungma from Ongpangkong
2. Mopungchuket from Kubolong
3. Khar from Mangkolemba
4. Molungkimong from Alongkima

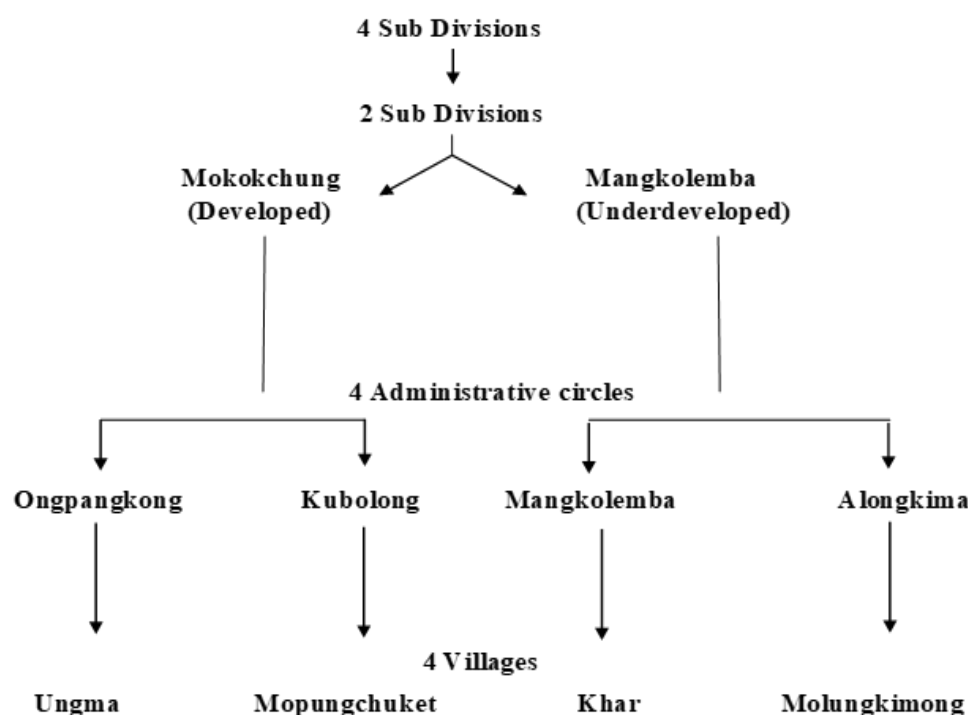


Fig. 3.2 Identification of the 2 subdivisions, 4 administrative circles, and 4 villages.

Ungma Village is approximately three kilometres south of Mokokchung Town. It is broadly regarded as the oldest and historically the largest among all Ao villages and is frequently referred to as the ‘birthplace’ or “cradle of the Ao civilisation,” as Ao tradition asserts that the tribe initially established itself in Ungma Village (Soyim) following their migration from their ancient home (District Administration, Mokokchung, n.d.). Ungma village is located in the Ongpangkong Administrative Circle of the Mokokchung district, with a total of 2294 households. It has a population of 9443, of which 4809 are male, while 4634 are female (Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, 2011).

Mopungchuket Village is in the central regions of the Mokokchung District, roughly 16 kilometres from Mokokchung Town. It is acknowledged as an important centre for rural tourism in Nagaland, having been formally designated a ‘Rural Tourism Village’ by the Government of Nagaland in 2007 (District Administration, Mokokchung, n.d.). Mopungchuket is renowned for the fabled love story of Jina and Etiben, often referred to as the “Romeo and Juliet” of the Ao Nagas. Mopungchuket village is part of the Kubolong Administrative Circle and comprises 743 homes. The population is 3,072, constituting 1,568 males and 1,504 females (Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, 2011).

Khar is a village in the Mangkolemba Administrative Circle of Mokokchung District, approximately 55 km from the district headquarters in Mokokchung. The total population is 3,614, comprising 1,815 males and 1,799 females (Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, 2011).

Molungkimong, an Ao village, is historically and culturally significant, located in the Alongkima Administrative Circle of the Mokokchung district. This village is acknowledged as the site where Christianity was first established in the Naga Hills, following the arrival of American missionary Rev. Dr Edward Winter Clark, who established the first church in Nagaland on December 22, 1872. The total population is 2,816, including 534 families, with 1,371 males and 1,445 females (Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, 2011).

3.5 Principle of Inclusion and Exclusion

For this study, the Mokokchung district in Nagaland is taken as the main universe of the study, as it is the main cultural centre point inhabited by the Ao Naga tribe. The remaining 16 districts in Nagaland have been excluded from the study, while within Mokokchung district, 2 subdivisions, 4 administrative circles, and 4 villages have been selected for analysis; from each of these villages, 50 households will be purposively surveyed.

The other two remaining subdivisions and five administrative circles, and the villages under them from the Mokokchung district, were also excluded because of the cost involved, time constraints, and wide geographical area. In addition to the 50 selected households from each village, all other households are also excluded from the study.

Similarly, concerning the choice of literature for review, only those accessible and available were included. No conscious exclusion of literature has been made for review.

3.6 Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted in two villages, Ungma and Khar, with 10 respondents from each village to test the interview schedule and assess its feasibility. The study commenced in Ungma Village, with interviews lasting over an hour. With Ungma being the largest and most developed village, it was beneficial to come across a respondent who owned property. The interview with her facilitated the identification of necessary adjustments to the interview schedule, including the addition of additional questions. Besides that, during the interviews, certain similar or repetitive questions were identified. Those questions were combined into a single question to avoid redundancy. Additionally, some questions were found to be too lengthy or complex, which made them difficult for respondents to understand; therefore, they were rephrased for simplicity and clarity.

The respondents interviewed in Ungma village were primarily residents of the town wards, which might have been the reason for coming across women with properties in their names. To ensure more accurate data collection, interviewing respondents residing within the village would be more ideal. It was also noted that the interview process could have been easier if a local had accompanied the researcher to the selected households. Randomly approaching houses without prior notice led to a formal atmosphere, making respondents self-conscious and, in some cases, unwilling to participate, often citing various

reasons for declining to be interviewed. With these experiences, the pilot study in Ungma village concluded.

The second half of the pilot study was conducted in Khar Village, and learning from the previous experience, a different approach was taken. The Khar Students' Union was contacted in advance to explain the purpose of the study, and the Union office bearers were requested to assist in identifying and introducing the researcher to the respondents. The union then proceeded with identifying the respondents and the households and informed them about the interview beforehand, resulting in a notable improvement in the interview process. No respondents declined the interview, and the informal atmosphere fostered more comfortable and free responses. With the respondents' consent, the interviews were also audio-recorded instead of writing down every response immediately. Only key points and significant views were noted during the interviews, which made the sessions shorter and more efficient.

The pilot study was completed with a total of 20 respondents. While several adjustments were made following the interviews in Ungma Village, no additional changes were required or observed during interviews in Khar Village, thereby finalising the interview schedule to be used in the study. However, one notable observation was that some respondents felt they were not knowledgeable enough to be interviewed in matters related to cultural practices, such as the inheritance practice, and were quite reluctant to share their views and opinions as well because of the fear that it might land them in trouble. They had to be constantly assured that their genuine responses were needed and appreciated and they would also be confidential and used purely for academic purposes.

3.7 Sources of Data

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative data from primary and secondary sources. The sources and the tools used for data collection have been discussed below:

3.7.1 Primary data

To collect primary data, which consists of firsthand information obtained directly by the researcher, a household-level survey was conducted by interviewing female respondents using an interview schedule that included both closed-ended and open-ended questions. This approach facilitated the collection of quantitative data while also obtaining and offering more comprehensive perspectives on the respondents' perceptions and experiences. Additionally, key informant interviews, focused group discussions, and case studies were also employed to gather more in-depth and detailed information for the study.

3.7.1.1 Interview schedule

The Interview Schedule elicited meaningful information and insights from respondents through seven sections. The first and second sections collected personal and familial details, while the third section focused on identifying general patterns of property ownership and inheritance. The fourth section explored women's empowerment in relation to property ownership, and the fifth section addressed conflict over property and inheritance. Meanwhile, the sixth section aimed to understand the barriers to women's inheritance, their views on equal inheritance rights, and the challenges they faced. Lastly, the seventh section looked at what society has done to help women acquire their inheritance rights.

The literature review provided insights that helped identify the main topics that needed to be covered and guided the writing of the study's questions. The next step involved formulating questions directly related to the study's objectives. Following the pilot study, several changes that needed to be made were identified, and adjustments were made to the master copy of the interview schedule accordingly, leading to the finalised version.

The questions were primarily structured as dichotomous questions, followed by open-ended questions intended to encourage respondents to share their

views and perspectives. Great care was taken to ensure the interview schedule was designed to effectively collect the data required for the study. Most importantly, all respondents were informed of their right to refrain from answering any questions that they felt infringed on their privacy. Furthermore, they were also assured that their responses and opinions, along with the study's findings, are strictly for academic purposes.

3.7.1.2 Key Informant Interviews

Following the completion of the interview schedule, in-depth interviews were conducted to explore particular questions that emerged during the initial phase of data collection, which required more detailed insights. These interviews were conducted with specific individuals identified as key informants due to their active participation in society and their considerable knowledge and experience pertaining to the subject matter. The focus was not only on their insights but also on understanding societal perceptions of women's property ownership and the challenges women face while inheriting property.

A semi-structured interview schedule was employed to allow for conversational flexibility while still ensuring that crucial topics were covered. The interviews carried out were face-to-face interactions at a time and place convenient for the informants. All interviews were conducted in the native dialect of the Ao Naga community, with each session lasting an average of 60 to 90 minutes, or longer in some cases. To ensure accuracy, the interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent.

The recordings were transcribed and translated into English for detailed analysis. The perspectives, quotations, and opinions shared by the informants have been incorporated into the study's findings, enriching the overall understanding of the context and challenges surrounding inheritance practices in the Ao Naga community. These in-depth interviews provided valuable contextual and detailed information, supplementing the data gathered during the initial fieldwork.

3.7.1.3 Focus group discussions (FGDs)

FGDs were held with the District Dubashi Court to explore the crucial concerns surrounding women's property ownership. The focus group discussions were also semi-structured, and an appointment was made beforehand to have the discussion on their date and time of convenience. The discussion has been integrated as qualitative insights, which have been fitted into the analysis of the study to enrich the understanding of the inheritance practice of Ao Naga society from a traditional customary law court point of view on the issue at hand.

3.7.1.4 Case study

Some unique and relevant cases during the course of data collection were identified and have been used as important components of qualitative data that best describe the current study, and the case studies have been incorporated to fit into the analysis and discussions.

3.7.2 Secondary data

Secondary data are those data obtained from secondary sources, and for this research, secondary data have been collected from various books, reports, national and international journals and different publications that have been accessible and available. The secondary data has been used mostly during the course of the literature review, which helped identify the research gap and ultimately led to the identification of key terms or concepts that were used in preparing the interview schedule. Moreover, the study's findings further contextualise the reviewed literature.

3.8 Research Experience and Data Collection

The literature review contributed significantly to the development of both the rationale of the study as well as the identification of key concepts that guided the formulation of the interview schedule to address the objectives of the

study. In turn, the pilot study helped finalise the tools for data collection, ensuring a systematic and effective process.

Fieldwork began in Ungma Village and concluded in Khar Village. Learning from the pilot study, the researcher contacted the student unions of all the villages beforehand, informing them about the research, its objectives, and the reasons for contacting them and seeking their assistance. These contacts made things easier, as through their help, respondents were identified and informed beforehand, thereby avoiding any sense of awkwardness or formality, and the respondents were also available on time. However, one potential drawback of involving the Student Union was the possibility of bias in the selection of respondents. The union may have chosen individuals they deemed more responsive or suitable for the study. This subjectivity could affect the sample's representativeness. To address this issue, the researcher requested the inclusion of respondents from all social categories, rather than solely those who were affluent, educated, or employed, thereby promoting inclusivity and diversity.

As experience grew, interviews and data collection became more natural and conversational rather than formal enquiries. These discussions often took place in the kitchen by the fireplace, a central space in Ao society where social interactions typically occur. Interestingly, it is also seen and considered as the women's domain in the household, providing a symbolic backdrop of the women's place in Ao society. However, not all interviews followed this pattern; in some modern Pucca houses, discussions took place in the sitting room, though the practice was less common. Most interviews took place in the kitchen by the fireplace.

Initially, the researcher approached the fieldwork with preconceived notions, assuming that Ao Naga women were denied inheritance rights because of their gender. However, through conversations with respondents, the researcher's understanding evolved, uncovering deeper layers of the inheritance issue. It became clear that land is intertwined with various factors: identity, citizenship, politics, culture, traditions, norms, village administration, land use, and gender.

As such, a dilemma arises: “Should cultural beliefs and practices be discarded in favour of gender equality, or should the current practice continue despite its discriminatory nature?”

A noteworthy observation during the fieldwork was that the people had rarely questioned the inheritance practices. They had simply accepted it as the norm. Furthermore, many respondents expressed appreciation that a male researcher was investigating the topic of women’s property inheritance rights. Some even commented, “If a female were conducting this research, many might assume she is a feminist and react differently. But because you are male, they may be more open to the discussion.” Such moments made the research worthwhile.

Throughout the fieldwork, the researcher encountered various experiences. While some interviews did not proceed as planned, others surpassed expectations. The people’s hospitality was warm and generous, fostering lasting relationships across the four villages. The developed villages of Ungma and Mopungchuket had well-maintained roads, but the journey to the underdeveloped villages of Khar and Molungkimong was challenging due to poor road conditions. Nonetheless, the experiences gained and faced during the fieldwork are something that the researcher would cherish. This document includes many intriguing insights and perspectives, which have been integrated as quotes to supplement and enrich the quantitative data in the analysis and interpretation.

3.9 Data Analysis

Following the collection of data from the field, it was scrutinised for completeness and the validity of information. For quantitative data, SPSS has been employed to analyse the data, which were coded manually and entered into Microsoft Excel first so that they could be exported to SPSS for further analysis. After the coding, data cleaning was conducted to identify missing or irrelevant data entries and carefully cross-checked to correct any errors or inconsistencies. One major problem was when people gave more than one answer to the same question. This procedure required the researcher to revisit

the collected data and recode the responses, adding new categories to accommodate the complexity in the master copy of the interview schedule. The meticulous process of data entry and cleaning ensured that the dataset is reliable, consistent, and suitable for statistical analysis. However, only simple frequency and percentage distribution were employed to compare responses between developed and underdeveloped villages for a comparative understanding. The qualitative data were obtained from the respondents during the interview schedule. These responses, expressed in the form of statements, were classified according to similar themes corresponding to the objectives and chapters of the study. Relevant quotations were selected and incorporated to enhance the analysis and findings of the study by supplementing the quantitative data. The procedural aspect of data analysis employed in the study thus comprises simple frequency and percentage distribution of quantitative data, which have been presented in a table comparatively between developed and underdeveloped villages to highlight the differences, and qualitative data in the form of descriptive narratives. Together, these analytical steps provided a comprehensive understanding of the property inheritance rights and practices of Ao Naga society.

3.10 Research Ethics

Research ethics are ethical ideals that guide researchers in conducting and reporting studies without dishonesty or the intent to hurt the examiners or participants of society as a whole, whether intentionally or unintentionally. For the current study, moral guidelines that are often used in most social science research were followed to establish the validity and integrity of the findings.

1. The research was done solely for academic purposes, and the researcher endeavoured his best to adhere to it.
2. The researcher's work was based on a fundamental respect for cultural identity and aimed to avoid challenging it.
3. The autonomy, integrity, freedom, and right to co-determination of the participants were respected.

4. Adequate information was provided to participants about the research's purpose and the intended use of the findings.
5. Informed consent was obtained from all the participants, ensuring their voluntary participation and explicit agreement to take part in the study.
6. The citations and references properly acknowledge the work of authors and scholars involved in this research.
7. During the primary data collection process, the researcher avoided any form of misleading or false information, as well as any potential bias.
8. Participants were informed about the limitations, expectations, and requirements of their role in the research.
9. The research would be made available to other researchers for secondary analysis and further use.
10. Lastly, AI-assisted writing tools such as Copilot, ChatGPT, QuillBot and Gemini were used to refine the sentence structure, grammar, and readability of the write-up without altering the substance of the findings.

3.11 Limitations of the Study

The limitation of the study aids in understanding the study's weakness. It also aids in a proper generalisation of the study's reliability. As all research has been impeded by certain constraints, so, too, is this research curtailed by the constraints which are described in the following lines:

1. Only four villages from the two selected sub-divisions are the focus of this study. Therefore, the study findings may not represent the general population throughout the entire district; rather, they might be more specific to the selected study sites, and future studies may arrive at different conclusions and findings.
2. Due to the deeply ingrained customary laws and patriarchal traditions in Ao Naga society, respondents may have hesitated to openly discuss the sensitive topics of property rights and gender inequality, which could lead to biases or result in politically correct responses instead of candid ones.

3. The respondents of the study included only female respondents from every household. Though the study is conducted from a gendered lens, the findings of the study is limited and indicative of the thoughts and opinions of women in Ao society.
4. Another limitation would be the lack of literature and reviews of Ao Naga inheritance practice.
5. The theoretical foundations of the study included only 6 theories: the gender theory of inheritance; kinship theories of descent and alliance; symbolic interactionism; social exchange; the conflict perspective; and the human rights-based approach. Future scholars can employ other theoretical perspectives.

3.12 Chapterisation

This thesis is classified into seven chapters, which are:

1. Introduction
2. Review of Literature
3. Methodological Framework
4. Socio-economic profile of women in Ao society
5. Ownership status, control and decision-making
6. Barriers to women's access to property
7. Summary and conclusion

3.13 Overview

The chapter begins by outlining the objectives of the study, clarifying its focus, and laying the groundwork for subsequent methodological choices. Following the objectives, the chapter discusses the research design and operationalisation of the concepts used in the study. After the research design, there is a discussion about the universe and sample selection. This discussion covers the target population, sampling methods, and the inclusion and exclusion rules that determine who is in the study. Next, the chapter elaborates on the sources of data, distinguishing between primary and secondary data collection methods.

The chapter also details the interview schedule that was followed and the pilot study conducted to test the instruments used for data collection. The chapter also analyses the research experience and data collection process, highlighting the significant challenges and insights discovered during the fieldwork. Additionally, this chapter explains the data analysis techniques used to interpret the findings and ensures the study adheres to key research ethics principles. The limitations of the study are also addressed to provide a balanced understanding of the scope and constraints of the research. Finally, the chapterisation outlines the overall structure of the thesis, serving as a roadmap for the upcoming chapters.

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Chapter IV

Socio-Economic Profile of Women in Ao Society

4.0 Introduction

4.1 Age Composition

4.2 Marital Status

4.3 Family Type and Composition

4.3.1 Size of the Household

4.3.2 Dependent Family Members

4.4 Type of Accommodation

4.5 Household Assets

4.6 Religious Denomination

4.7 Educational Qualification

4.8 Employment Status

4.8.1 Type of Employment

4.9 Income of the Individual

4.9.1 Family Income

4.10 Size of land owned

4.11 Overview

Chapter IV

Socio-Economic Profile of Women in Ao Society

4.0 Introduction

The preceding chapter outlines not only the study's objectives but also the methodology used to determine the sample size and the procedures or techniques employed to collect data for the study, establishing a foundation for understanding the scope and rigour of this research. Now, this chapter examines the socio-economic profile of the respondents to provide deeper insights into the population under study. Understanding these is essential, as economic activities and status vary from family to family, influencing property ownership, the assets owned, their acquisition, and the inheritance process, which are all influenced by their educational qualifications, family size and income.

Examining the socio-economic parameters allows to better understand differences in property ownership and access to various assets. By analysing the respondents' socioeconomic situations, this chapter tries to elucidate the underlying causes of their property ownership or non-ownership, providing a more comprehensive picture of their circumstances.

To achieve this, the present chapter analyses certain key socio-economic variables to provide a sociological differentiation of the respondents. Specifically, focus is on four villages in Mokokchung District: Ungma, Mopungchuket, Khar, and Molungkimong, to establish a clear socio-economic profile of the respondents. Analysing the socio-economic backgrounds is crucial, as these characteristics have a direct impact on personality patterns, perceptions, and attitudes towards property ownership. Without this understanding, it would be difficult to interpret the respondent's attitudes towards ownership and inheritance.

The variables examined include age, marital status, religion, educational qualifications, employment status, family size and income, type of

accommodation, household assets and land owned. Together, these variables in turn will help us to understand the patterns of land and property owned, as well as the similarities and differences among the respondents. Accordingly, this chapter elaborates on the findings gathered through the interview schedule, focusing on elements that are particularly relevant to the study.

4.1 Age Composition

Age is commonly defined as the amount of time that has passed between the birth of an individual, object, or event and a specific moment, generally the present. In biological and human terms, age refers to the period between birth and a specified point in a person's life (Settersten & Mayer, 1997). More than a simple chronological marker, age encompasses various dimensions of life, including maturity, health, and life stage. As such, age is more than just a number of years lived; it also reflects the accumulated experiences and characteristics associated with a particular stage in life (Burt, 1991).

As women age, their socio-economic stability and bargaining strength can improve, often making it easier for them to acquire property independently through personal income or jointly with their husbands after their marriage. Older women who have acquired personal assets or savings may have stronger bargaining power, as ownership of properties and assets generally varies with age. While older women may have greater opportunities to own property, younger generations may face barriers due to socio-economic considerations. This age disparity may also influence the views towards property inheritance rights, with older women perhaps holding more traditional perspectives, while younger women, influenced by education and broader legal frameworks, may advocate for fairer inheritance practices.

All of these elements will be taken into account during the analysis in subsequent chapters. Accordingly, the age distribution of the sample respondents can be seen from table 4.1.

Table 4.1 Age distribution of the respondents

Age	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency/ (%)
21 -30 Years	18	11	29 (14.5%)
31- 40 Years	21	20	41 (20.5%)
41 - 50 Years	33	25	58 (29%)
Above 50 Years	28	44	72 (36%)
Total	100	100	200 (100%)

distribution of respondents, as shown in Table 4.1, provides insights into the demographic composition of the study population in developed and underdeveloped villages. The age of the respondents ranged from 22 years as the youngest to 88 years as the oldest among the respondents. Based on the lowest and highest age of the respondents, the age groups were classified into four exclusive class intervals: 21–30, 31–40, 41–50 and above 50 years.

As portrayed in Table 4.1, Ao women in the age group of 21-30 years comprised 14.5 per cent of the sampled respondents, making it the smallest group. Developed villages contributed 18 respondents, while underdeveloped villages had only 11 respondents, indicating a slightly higher representation of younger respondents in developed villages. This could imply that younger people are more likely to live in or relocate to urban areas or towns from underdeveloped villages in search of better education or employment prospects. Consequently, there are a lower number of younger respondents in underdeveloped villages, while younger people in developed villages remain due to their proximity to towns and the necessary facilities available nearby. Additionally, this age group has the lowest number of respondents in the study because none of these respondents would have any acquired properties, as this age group does not have the means or the income to acquire properties on their own, nor could they inherit any ancestral or clan properties. However, as the study progresses into further chapters, we will explore their opinions on

inheritance practices and see whether they share the same values and perceptions as the older generation, given the generational differences.

The next age group consisted of middle-aged respondents (31-40 years), accounting for 20.5 per cent of the sample. Both developed and undeveloped villages had a balanced distribution of this age group (21 & 20 respondents, respectively), indicating a steady presence of middle-aged respondents in both regions. This age group often comprises individuals who have recently married, are initiating their own families, and are in their family-rearing years.

Another significant portion of the sampled respondents were in the age group of 41-50 years, comprising 29 per cent of the sampled respondents. Underdeveloped villages accounted for 25 respondents, while developed villages contributed 33 respondents. Respondents in this age group are in their peak earning period, more settled with their family income and socioeconomic activities, and acquiring properties jointly with their husbands since Ao women cannot own and inherit ancestral or clan properties.

Lastly, the largest portion of the respondents belonged to the age group of 50 years and above, making up 36 per cent of the sample. Within this age group, undeveloped villages account for a considerable majority with 44 respondents, while developed villages account for only 28 respondents. The high presence of older respondents in underdeveloped villages somewhat indicates that younger generations are relocating to towns and urban regions in search of greater opportunities, leaving the elderly in traditional or rural settings. Meanwhile, respondents in developed villages do not need to do so. Moreover, this age group has the highest number of respondents in the study because naturally they were more aware of the *sobaliba* and the traditional inheritance system and practices.

The age distribution shows potential socioeconomic differences, with younger populations in developed areas having greater access to modern education, amenities and employment opportunities, increasing their chances of acquiring property on their own. Furthermore, the presence of a larger older

population of respondents may indicate a preference for traditional inheritance practices and norms, with land and property likely retained by male members.

This age distribution reflects not only potential socio-economic variations but also the effect of age on marital status. In general, younger respondents are more likely to be single or newly married, whereas older respondents are more likely to be married for a longer amount of time, widowed, or divorced. The relationship between age and marital status can have an impact on property ownership and inheritance patterns, as marital status frequently influences socioeconomic stability and negotiating strength. In the following section, the marital status of the respondents is discussed in detail.

4.2 Marital Status

Marital status refers to the legal or personal relationship a person holds with a spouse or partner, categorising them as single, married, divorced, widowed, or in a legally recognised partnership. This status often includes an agreement to share and provide a variety of rights, duties and economic responsibilities. Accordingly, Girgis et al. (2011) define marriage as a permanent and exclusive union orientated towards family life that lasts until death or ends through divorce or separation. This marital status often determines a woman's legal right to jointly owned acquired properties. In this regard, unmarried women may have different privileges compared to married women, as marriage is frequently viewed as a partnership that can enhance financial capabilities. Married couples often combine their income and resources, increasing the likelihood of acquiring property, which may be more challenging for single individuals (Grinstein-Weiss et al., 2011). Widows also face obstacles, as traditional norms limit their claim to the late husband's ancestral or clan properties, leaving them reliant on sons or extended relatives for support.

Marital status provides key insights into variances in responses across different categories, making it an important variable in determining the socioeconomic profile and its relationship to property ownership. As such, Table 4.2 highlights the marital status distribution of respondents, providing a clear

picture of the demographic composition in both developed and underdeveloped villages. The respondents were categorised into five marital status groups: married, unmarried, widowed, divorced, and single, allowing for a focused examination of the socioeconomic dynamics and property ownership patterns associated with each category.

Table 4.2 Marital status of the respondents

Marital Status	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency/ (%)
Married	67	68	135 (67.5 %)
Unmarried	1	3	4 (2%)
Widow	8	11	19 (9.5%)
Divorced	Nil	1	1(0.5 %)
Single	24	17	41 (20.5%)
Total	100	100	200 (100%)

Majority of the sampled responders in this study are married, accounting for 135 (67.5%) out of 200 respondents. The distribution is roughly equal, with 67 respondents from developed villages and 68 respondents from undeveloped villages. This substantial representation reflects the significance of marriage in property ownership and socioeconomic stability, emphasising that married couples are more likely to acquire or jointly own property due to their shared financial resources and obligations.

The next category of respondents consists of unmarried individuals, with only four respondents (2%), with one respondent from a developed village and 3 respondents from underdeveloped villages. These unmarried respondents are of marriageable age yet remain unmarried and continue living with and looking after their parents. In Ao society, women and daughters are often expected to look after their parents, a duty that continues even after marriage. However, in some cases, daughters remain unmarried and stay with their parents to look after them. This phenomenon accounts for the higher number of unmarried respondents in underdeveloped villages. Moreover, the low number of

unmarried people in developed villages reflects a preference for family-orientated lives, culturally relevant as every individual is expected to get married and continue the bloodline and heritage.

Widows were the next social category, with 19 (9.5%) respondents, among which eight of them were in developed villages and 11 in undeveloped villages. These widows have lost their husbands due to sudden death or old age and are either dependent on their late husband's pension, their own income, or their offspring. In Ao society, widows are particularly vulnerable under traditional norms, which exclude them from the right to own their husband's ancestral or clan properties, leaving them reliant on male relatives.

The category of divorced respondents includes only one individual, making up 0.5 per cent of the sample, living in an underdeveloped village. Due to cultural stigmas associated with divorce in the community, divorce is rare. Moreover, in the patriarchal Ao society, divorced men often remarry, while divorced women face greater challenges in finding new partners and frequently remain single; however, this is not true for all women.

The last social category includes single individuals, consisting of 41 respondents (20.5%) of the sampled respondents, out of which 24 are from developed villages and 17 from underdeveloped villages. These single respondents are those who are not currently in a romantic relationship, such as dating, engaged, or married. Developed villages had more respondents who were single, as those younger in age (21-30 years) were more from developed areas and, as such, the underdeveloped villages had fewer single respondents. Furthermore, these respondents who are single do not own any property, as women in general cannot inherit any of their fathers' ancestral properties, nor are they economically settled enough to own them.

This analysis of marital status highlights that married respondents are likely the primary property owners due to their combined financial strength and ability to acquire private properties. In contrast, widows and single females often have limited access to property ownership, reflecting differences in

inheritance customs based on gender and marital status. This study of marital status provides a more complex picture of the respondents' socioeconomic profiles and their link to property ownership, highlighting how traditional norms and marital status intersect to shape property dynamics.

The marital status of respondents not only offers significant insight into their social dynamics but also underscores the correlation between marital status and family composition. Married respondents either belong to nuclear, joint, or extended households, whereas individuals who are unmarried, divorced, or widowed may have a distinct lifestyle. This relationship between marital status and family structure impacts socioeconomic stability, as family type often influences household size and the number of dependent members. The next section discusses the respondents' family type, household size, and the number of dependent members in the family.

4.3 Family Type

A family is a group of individuals bonded by marriage or blood relations, forming an integrated and functional unit within society (Chandrasekhar, 1954). Families collectively own resources, such as assets and property, and each member's share is determined by events such as birth or death, gender, and kin relations. At its simplest, a family consists of an adult and their children. More commonly, it includes two married adults, usually a man and woman from different lineages, and their children, all residing in a private, separate domicile, a structure known as a nuclear family. In India, there are many different types of families, such as nuclear, extended, and joint families (Sooryamoorthy, 2012). The joint family system includes multiple married couples and their children living together (Mandelbaum, 1948), and over time, joint families in rural areas have evolved (Shankar & Menon, 1993), giving way to both extended and nuclear families as socioeconomic conditions change (D'Cruz & Bharat, 2001).

Understanding the family type and size is critical for assessing the respondent's socio-economic profile and their relationship to property

ownership, since these variables often influence economic stability, social support, and asset management. Accordingly, the following Table 4.3 presents the type of family of the respondents.

Table 4.3 Family Type

Family Type	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency/ (%)
Nuclear Family	100	100	200 (100%)
Total	100	100	200 (100%)

Table 4.3 illustrates that all respondents in both developed and underdeveloped villages are members of nuclear families, with a total of all the sampled 200 respondents (100%) in the study, and this uniformity reflects the cultural norms favouring smaller family units. In Ao societies after the marriage, the newly married couple often starts their own family away from their parents, and hence the prevalence of nuclear families. This trend reflects broader socio-economic transformations, as family type has a direct influence on property ownership patterns.

Furthermore, Indian families are also categorised based on lineage, and the Nagas and Aos in general follow a patrilineal and patriarchal system. This system perpetuates patriarchal norms and attitudes, negatively impacting women's status (Nukshirenla & Dhanaraju, 2021). In this context, it was also observed that no respondents were recognised as the heads of their households. Invariably, their husbands or fathers held this role. The patriarchal structure essentially assigns authority and decision-making power to male family members in the Ao society, marginalising women's position within the household. This established system continues to uphold traditional gender hierarchies, making it difficult for women to attain equal status and autonomy within their families.

4.3.1 Size of the Household

The family type significantly influences the size of the household, and as per the preceding analysis, all sampled respondents belong to nuclear families, which generally comprise fewer members, typically ranging from three to five individuals. Table 4.4 illustrates the distribution of family sizes, offering valuable insights into the composition of the study population. Among the sampled respondents, which can be seen in the following table, family sizes ranged from the smallest household consisting of one member to the largest encompassing eight members.

Table 4.4 Size of the Household

Household Size	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency/ (%)
1	3	4	7 (3.5%)
2	11	8	19 (9.5%)
3	18	23	41 (20.5%)
4	39	30	69 (34.5%)
5	24	31	55 (27.5%)
6	5	3	8 (4%)
7	Nil	Nil	Nil
8	Nil	1	1 (0.5%)
Total	100	100	200 (100%)

The smallest category is single-member households, with seven (3.5%), including three in developed villages and four in underdeveloped villages. Two-member households account for 19 (9.5%), with developed villages having a slightly greater proportion (11) compared to underdeveloped villages (8). Families with three members make up a sizable component of the sample, with 41 (20.5%) households, consisting of 18 in developed villages and 23 in underdeveloped ones.

The highest category is four-member families, with 69 (34.5%), including 39 in developed villages and 30 in underdeveloped villages. Next are five-member

families, with 55 (27.5%), comprising 24 in developed villages and 31 in underdeveloped villages. Families with six members are less common, with only eight (4%), including five in developed and three in underdeveloped villages. Notably, there are no families with seven members in either of the sampled villages. Finally, the largest recorded household size, with eight members, is represented by a single household (0.5%) in an underdeveloped village.

This distribution highlights the dominance of medium-sized families (3-5 members) forming the majority of the families from the sampled respondents, which are prevalent in both developed and undeveloped villages, illustrating the overall prevalence of nuclear family structures.

4.3.2 Dependent Family Members

Building on the preceding analysis, Table 4.5 shows the number of dependants in each family. This section provides a glance into the family dynamics, emphasising the economic hardship on nuclear households. Identifying the proportion of dependents gives us a better understanding of how family size and the number of non-working members affect the respondent's and the family's total socioeconomic standing. The data collected depicts various dependency scenarios, emphasising the diversity of household compositions and associated financial responsibilities, with the number of dependents ranging from zero to seven members. This range demonstrates the variety of family compositions and accompanying financial responsibilities, ranging from families with no dependents to those with more non-working members.

Table 4.5 Dependent Family Members

Dependent Members	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency/ (%)
0	9	6	15 (7.5%)
1	29	31	60 (30 %)
2	41	37	78 (39%)
3	14	23	37 (18.5%)
4	7	2	9 (4.5%)
7	Nil	1	1 (0.5%)
Total	100	100	200 (100%)

A total of 1households (7.5%) has no dependent family members, with nine in developed villages and six in underdeveloped ones. These households mainly consist of widows who live independently and newly married nuclear families without children or elderly dependants. The slightly greater number in developed areas is due to the concentration of more newly married couples here.

Households with one dependent comprise the second largest category, accounting for 30 per cent of respondents (60). This group is evenly distributed between developed (29 respondents) and underdeveloped (31 respondents) villages. These families are most frequently made up of couples with one child or elderly family members who require care. The nearly equal representation implies that family dynamics in both regions follow comparable patterns of responsibility.

Families with two dependents account for the majority of the sample, with 39 per cent of respondents (78). This group contains 41 households in developed villages and 37 in underdeveloped villages. These households are all mostly made up of nuclear families with two children depending on the parents. The distribution of developed and underdeveloped areas also demonstrates the prevalence of this family size as a common structure in both regions.

Households with three dependents account for 18.5 per cent of respondents (37), with a significant difference between developed (14 respondents) and underdeveloped (23 respondents) villages. The prevalence of larger families in underdeveloped areas reflects family structures preferring more offspring, and, because of the increased reliance ratios, such households may experience greater financial difficulty.

Nine respondent households (4.5%) have four dependents in their family, with seven in developed and two from underdeveloped villages. These larger families are, however, uncommon. Finally, only one family (0.5%) reported having seven dependents, which is in an underdeveloped village, where the wife and their six offspring depend on the husband's income. Such huge households are rare, indicating a considerable departure from families having more than three offspring. Moreover, this household is expected to confront significant financial obstacles in managing resources and addressing the requirements of its dependents due to their high family member-to-income earner ratio.

The analysis of dependent family members shows considerable differences between developed and underdeveloped villages. While developed villages highlight a trend towards smaller families with fewer dependents, underdeveloped villages depict family structures with greater reliance ratios. These disparities have far-reaching consequences for economic stability, resource allocation, and overall quality of life. Furthermore, fewer dependants mean more disposable income for household investment, resulting in higher property values and better maintenance. Smaller family sizes also indicate the possibility of acquiring properties that daughters can inherit. In contrast, larger families with more dependants face financial constraints, restricting household investments and maintenance. These factors can lead to compromised long-term property stability and economic growth.

This examination of family composition, including household size and the number of dependent members, paints a clear picture of the respondents' living

arrangements and socioeconomic dynamics. Smaller nuclear families with fewer dependants typically have higher economic stability and better resource allocation, whereas larger families with more dependants may experience financial restrictions. These factors might also impact the type of accommodation in which respondents reside, as household composition directly affects living conditions and property ownership. In the following section, we will explore the respondents' living arrangements and housing conditions.

4.4 Type of Accommodation

Type of accommodation refers to the shape, structure, and ownership of a dwelling place that people occupy. In India, types of houses are broadly classified as Kuccha, Semi Pucca and Pucca houses (Neelakanta et al., 2022), reflecting the durability and material quality used. These classifications carry socio-economic implications, as each type offers details about the resident's financial situation, lifestyle, and access to resources.

A significant portion of the Naga population continues to reside in villages (Census of India, 2011). In relation to the respondents, Table 4.6 below presents the details of their dwelling arrangements, classifying the living arrangements of the respondents into three broad categories: Kuccha, Semi-Pucca, and Pucca houses.

Table 4.6 Type of Accommodation

Type of Accommodation	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency/ (%)
Kuccha	9	24	33 (16.5%)
Semi-Pucca	69	60	129 (64.5%)
Pucca	22	16	38 (19%)
Total	100	100	200 (100)

A total of 33 respondents (16.5%) reside in Kuccha houses, with nine in developed villages and 24 in underdeveloped villages. Kuccha houses, which

are built with materials such as bamboo, wood, thatched roofs and other temporary materials, are more prevalent in undeveloped areas, emphasising the financial constraints and limited access to resources that these communities confront, highlighting the rural nature of the villages far from the town and urban areas. The lower number of Kuccha dwellings in developed areas indicates better infrastructure, access to amenities and economic opportunities.

The majority of respondents, 129 households (64.5%), live in semi-pucca houses, which are a mix of temporary and permanent materials. This category is almost evenly distributed between developed (69) and underdeveloped (60) households, indicating that semi-pucca housing is common among middle-income households in both developed and underdeveloped villages. This indicates that while many households in both regions have access to better materials, there is still a significant reliance on semi-permanent structures due to economic constraints.

Pucca houses, constructed completely of durable and high-quality materials, account for 38 households (19%), with 22 in developed villages and 16 in underdeveloped villages. Pucca dwelling structures indicate financial stability and increased access to resources. The higher number of pucca houses in developed villages reflects better socioeconomic conditions, where families are more likely to afford permanent and durable housing.

The type of accommodation directly reflects the respondent's socioeconomic standing. Households in kuccha dwellings often encounter greater financial difficulties, limiting their access to resources, whereas those in pucca dwellings have better economic stability and, as such greater access to different amenities. The widespread presence of semi-pucca houses, however, demonstrates the transitional nature of housing in both regions, as families strive to improve their living conditions as well as their economic conditions.

The analysis of types of accommodation sheds light on the respondents' economic standing, demonstrating the differences in financial stability and access to resources among different households. This understanding of living

conditions provides a basis for determining the assets owned by these households, which further indicates their economic capabilities and choice of lifestyle. Household assets are indicators of wealth and comfort, demonstrating the extent to which families can invest in and access essential and luxury products. In the following section, we will look at the household assets owned by the respondents, highlighting their distribution and importance in their everyday lives and overall socioeconomic standing.

4.5 Household Assets

Household assets encompass both the tangible and intangible resources owned by a household, which include property, financial assets, and personal possessions. Land, buildings, livestock, transportation equipment, and household durables like appliances, furniture, and electronics are common examples of physical assets, collectively representing the total assets owned by the household. These assets are important indicators of economic well-being, since they reflect the value of a household's physical and financial assets, which, in turn, play a significant role in determining the socio-economic analysis of a household (Kumar et al., 2018). The following Table 4.7 highlights the household assets owned by the respondents of the study.

Table 4.7 Household Assets

Household Assets	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency/ (%)
Television	88	74	162 (81%)
Mobile Phones	100	100	200 (100%)
Refrigerator	67	43	110 (55%)
Washing Machine	51	37	98 (49%)
Gas Stove/Induction Stove	95	89	184 (92%)
Computer/Laptop	45	21	66 (33%)
Livestock	25	77	102 (51%)
Total	100	100	200 (100%)

The distribution of household assets provides insights into the assets owned by the respondents in developed and underdeveloped villages. The assets analysed include televisions, mobile phones, refrigerators, washing machines, gas stoves/induction stoves, computers/laptops, and livestock.

Television as a means of entertainment and its ownership is significantly higher in developed villages, with 88 households owning a television compared to 74 households in underdeveloped villages, making up a total of 162 households (81%). This tendency can be related to improved financial stability among families in developed countries, where entertainment and access to information via television are considered essential and luxurious. However, television ownership is lower in underdeveloped villages with limited disposable income, but it remains relatively high, showing its popularity as a desired household asset across different economic disparities.

Mobile phone ownership stands out as a unique phenomenon, with all 200 households in both developed and underdeveloped villages (100%) owning at least one mobile phone. This emphasises the importance of mobile phones in modern life, irrespective of socioeconomic standing or regional disparities. Mobile phones have evolved from a luxury to a necessary asset, serving as an essential communication device and access point to digital services, particularly in locations with limited infrastructure for other types of connectivity.

Refrigerators are more common in developed villages, with 67 households owning one compared to 43 households in underdeveloped villages, making up a total of 110 households (55%). This gap can be attributed to higher purchasing capability among households in developed villages, as well as easier access to markets and more convenient means of transportation. In underdeveloped villages, low ownership indicates economic constraints along with other factors such as limited access to markets and transportation difficulties.

The distribution of washing machines owned highlights a significant disparity, with 51 households in developed villages owning one compared to only 37 households in underdeveloped villages, making up a total of 98 households (49%). This difference reflects the better financial capability of residents in developed villages, where washing machines are regarded as a necessity due to their convenience. In contrast, in underdeveloped villages, many households still rely on manual washing methods due to financial constraints.

Gas and induction stoves are widely used in both regions, with 95 households in developed villages and 89 households in underdeveloped villages, making up a total of 184 households (92%). This widespread ownership highlights the universal importance of modern kitchen appliances, which are considered necessities for everyday life. The slightly higher prevalence in developed villages is due to improved availability of resources such as cooking gas and electricity as well as financial stability.

When it comes to computer and laptop ownership, there is a significant difference, with 45 households in developed villages owning these devices compared to only 21 households in underdeveloped villages, making up a total of 66 households (33%). This disparity exemplifies the digital divide, in which families with more financial capability value technologies for education, work, and pleasure. Meanwhile, lower ownership rates in underdeveloped villages are due to fewer financial resources and less exposure to the value of digital appliances.

Livestock ownership is substantially higher in underdeveloped villages, with 77 households rearing livestock such as pigs and hens, compared to 25 households in developed villages, making up a total of 102 households (51%). This difference reflects the economic priorities of the two regions. Livestock provides income, food, and security in underdeveloped regions, playing a crucial role in subsistence living. In contrast, households in developed regions have access to alternative resources and employment opportunities, which explains the lower ownership rates.

The analysis of household assets highlights socioeconomic differences between developed and underdeveloped villages while also identifying universal trends. Many people own assets such as mobile phones and gas stoves because they are essential. However, differences exist in assets such as refrigerators, washing machines, laptops, and livestock rearing, reflecting different economic priorities and lifestyles. The data gathered thus provides a comprehensive picture of the material conditions and lifestyle choices of families in both developed and underdeveloped villages.

Examining the age, marital status, type of housing, family composition, and household assets offered detailed insights into the respondent's socioeconomic status, living conditions, and distribution of assets. These elements are linked to cultural and social norms, which frequently influence various aspects of daily life, such as property ownership and inheritance traditions. Religious denominations also play an important role in defining cultural and societal norms, influencing not just personal beliefs and practices but also social institutions and economic behaviours. As such, the subsequent section looks into the respondent's religious affiliations, providing an understanding of their religious backgrounds and how these might influence their socio-economic behaviours and norms.

4.6 Religious Denomination

Religion is a social and cultural system that includes beliefs, practices, and moral values that connect people to a transcendent or divine element. According to the Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion, religion is both a personal belief system and a collective social structure that profoundly shapes communities and identities (Clarke, 2011). The British colonisation of Northeast India in the 19th century brought Christianity to the Naga Hills, significantly propelled by the arrival of American Baptist missionary Edward Winter Clark (1830-1913) to the Ao-Naga people. Within a span of less than a century, Christianity spread rapidly among the Aos and Nagas in general and established itself as the predominant religion in Nagaland (Jamir, 2017).

In the Mokokchung District, Christianity among the Ao tribe is predominantly influenced by Baptist Christianity, which has deep historical roots from early American Baptist missionary efforts. The Ao Baptist Arogo Mungdang (ABAM), a significant Baptist organisation, established one of the first mission centres in the area, and its influence remains particularly strong within the Ao community. Although other Christian denominations exist, they constitute a smaller proportion compared to the Baptist community (Census of India, 2011). Accordingly, Table 4.8 summarises the religious affiliations of the sample respondents.

Table 4.8 Religious Denomination of the respondents

Religious Denomination	Developed Frequency/%	Undeveloped Frequency/%	Total Frequency (%)
Baptist	100	100	200 (100%)
Total	100	100	200

All 200 respondents (100%) identify as Baptists, regardless of whether they are from developed or underdeveloped villages. This unwavering affiliation with the Baptist denomination highlights the strong historical and cultural influence of the Baptist faith within the Ao community. The significant missionary activities of the ABAM and its deep integration into the social and spiritual fabric of the Ao tribe have also solidified its position as the predominant religious denomination among the AOs in Mokokchung District.

In his seminal work, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Durkheim (1915) contends that religion stems from clan loyalty and identity. Religion's rituals and ceremonies serve a vital function in reinforcing the bonds and shared identities of its members. This perspective resonates with the inheritance practice of the AOs, in which land is an important symbol of clan solidarity and identity. Similar to religious activities, attachment to ancestral land reflects a collective conscience and serves as a unifying force in the community. Land inheritance governed by customary laws, not only maintains the social fabric but also reflects the cultural identity of the people.

The influence of religion extends to education because religion often serves as an initial foundation for educational values and institutions. In the case of the Ao community, American Baptist missionaries not only promoted religious beliefs but also emphasised the value of education as a means for personal and community development. Formal education among the Aos resulted from the efforts of the Baptist missionaries, which have made a substantial contribution to the community's educational development. In the following section, we will now examine the educational background of the study's respondents.

4.7 Educational Qualification

Education is a foundational element in an individual's life, commonly defined as the process by which knowledge, skills, beliefs, and habits are gained through structured learning in institutions such as schools and universities. It provides a structure for intellectual and social development, essential for both personal and societal advancement (Abenawe, 2022). Additionally, education promotes the development of both individuals and communities by serving as a powerful tool in addressing social and economic issues. It also aids in establishing an individual's status and reputation in society (Woessmann, 2015).

Education is a primary determinant of socio-economic status, which affects social mobility, earning potential, and employment. Individuals with higher levels of education generally have access to better employment opportunities and income, which can elevate their economic standing and standard of living (Singh & Choudhary, 2015). In the case of this study, examining the respondent's educational levels provides key insights into their socio-economic profiles, as shown in Table 4.9, which categorises the educational backgrounds of the respondents.

Table 4.9 Educational distribution of the respondents

Educational Distribution	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency/ (%)
Primary	7	9	16 (8%)
High School	19	44	63 (31.5%)
Secondary School	22	22	44 (22%)
Graduate	32	19	51 (21.5%)
Postgraduate	9	3	12 (6%)
M.Phil./Ph.D.	1	Nil	1 (0.5%)
If currently studying	10	3	13 (6.5%)
Total	100	100	200

The educational distribution among the respondents was categorised into seven groups: primary, high school, secondary school, graduate, postgraduate, M.Phil./Ph.D., and students who are currently studying, reflecting varying levels of educational attainment. A total of 16 respondents (8%) completed only primary education, with seven respondents from developed villages and nine respondents from undeveloped villages. The slightly larger number in underdeveloped areas reflects issues which are common in rural areas. The second category, high school graduates, makes up the largest group, with 63 respondents (31.5%), 19 from developed villages and 44 from undeveloped villages. The result shows that, while basic education has improved and more people are becoming more educated, impediments to higher education still exist, particularly in rural areas.

Secondary school graduates account for 44 respondents (22%), with equal representation (22 each) in both developed and underdeveloped villages. This balance suggests that people are giving more importance to education and have realised its value, resulting in advancement to higher academic levels.

57 respondents (25.5%) represent graduate-level education, with a significant difference between developed villages (32 respondents) and undeveloped villages (19 respondents). The postgraduate group follows a similar trend, with

12 respondents (6%) overall, nine from developed villages and only three from undeveloped villages. At the highest academic level, only one respondent (0.5%) holds a Ph.D. degree and is from a developed village. The higher number of respondents with higher educational qualifications from developed villages indicates greater and easier access to higher education institutions. In contrast, people from underdeveloped and remote areas, lacking proper facilities and infrastructure, have to move to areas with better amenities, which many might not afford, resulting in lower numbers.

Moreover, the data reveals that there were 13 respondents (6.5%) who are currently pursuing their education and are more prevalent in developed villages, with 10 respondents from developed areas and three from underdeveloped areas. This disparity is due to the same factors: better access to educational facilities, financial resources, and overall improved economic conditions in developed areas, enabling more individuals to continue their education.

Significant educational attainment disparities exist between developed and underdeveloped villages. Developed villages had a higher number of responders with graduate, postgraduate, and doctoral degrees, highlighting the benefits of improved infrastructure and access to educational facilities. In contrast, underdeveloped villages had a higher proportion of respondents with primary and secondary school education, reflecting structural hurdles such as economic and geographical challenges and proper infrastructures for higher academic progression. Education has a significant impact on socioeconomic outcomes, with individuals who have higher educational qualifications being more likely to have better employment opportunities and, as a result, achieve financial stability, contributing to increased socioeconomic mobility.

Education has a significant impact on an individual's employment opportunities, earning possibility, and overall economic well-being. Higher levels of education often result in enhanced employment prospects, increased income potential, and greater job security. Education also provides individuals

with the skills and knowledge required to enter and excel in various professions. Consequently, people with higher education have access to more prominent and higher-paying jobs, while those with lower education may end up in lower-skilled, lower-paying positions. This connection demonstrates the importance of education in shaping one's career path and economic standing. As a result, in the following section, we will examine the employment status and income levels of the respondents in this study, presenting an overall picture of their economic activities and financial situation.

4.8 Employment Status

Employment refers to the status of having a paid job, indicating whether a person is working and being compensated for it. This status may encompass full-time or part-time employment, self-employment, joblessness, or being outside the labour force (Cappelli & Keller, 2013). As the primary source of income for individuals and families, employment directly influences purchasing power and the ability to afford necessities such as housing, healthcare, and education. It also has a significant impact on an individual's socioeconomic status, which includes income, education level, occupation, and overall financial stability (Autor, 2019).

According to the 2011 Census of India, the economy of Mokokchung District is primarily centred on agriculture and its related activities. The majority of the workforce is engaged in cultivating crops, with agricultural labourers accounting for 58.05 per cent of the district's total workforce. The remaining workforce is divided into categories, such as household industries and other non-agricultural occupations, which account for 38.15 per cent of the labour force. The diversity of economic activity and income sources has a considerable impact on socioeconomic status throughout the district (Census of India, 2011). As such, Table 4.10 provides the employment status of the Ao women respondents sampled for the study.

Table 4.10 Employment Status of the respondents

Employment Status	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency/ (%)
Employed	63	46	109 (54.5%)
Unemployed	27	51	78 (39%)
Student	10	3	13 (6.5%)
Total	100	100	200

The majority of respondents, 109 of 200 (54.5%), are employed. Among them, 63 respondents are from developed villages and 46 from underdeveloped villages. The larger number of employed people in developed areas reflects the benefits of improved infrastructure, educational opportunities, and access to diversified job opportunities in these places. In contrast, the lower employment rate in underdeveloped areas implies limited economic prospects and a reliance on traditional livelihoods, which are not always formal or stable.

Unemployed respondents account for 78 individuals (39%), with considerable differences between the two regions. Only 27 respondents from developed villages are unemployed, compared to 51 in underdeveloped villages. The greater unemployment rate in underdeveloped areas highlights the socioeconomic issues these communities confront, such as limited work opportunities, lower educational attainment and access, and reliance on subsistence farming or informal labour markets.

Besides the employed and unemployed categories, the rest of the respondents were students, accounting for 13 respondents (6.5%), with 10 from developed villages and only three from underdeveloped villages. The higher proportion of students in developed villages is due to their proximity to and access to higher educational institutions and resources, allowing individuals to pursue their studies. In contrast, the low number of students in underdeveloped villages is due to factors such as economic restraints, a lack of infrastructure,

and mostly because the students had moved to urban areas and towns where they could pursue their higher education and employment opportunities.

The employment status distribution reflects the economic and educational differences that exist between developed and underdeveloped villages. A higher number of employments in developed villages contributes to their socioeconomic stability, whereas a higher amount of unemployment in underdeveloped villages indicates continuing economic vulnerabilities. The lower proportion of students in underdeveloped villages also indicates the need for better access to higher educational facilities and employment opportunities.

4.8.1 Type of Employment

Building on the analysis of the employment status distribution, Table 4.11 below provides further details into the type of employment held by the sampled respondents. This table categorises their employment status into government, private, self-employed, and unemployed respondents, providing a more complete picture of the economic responsibilities and activities of Ao women in both the developed and underdeveloped villages taken for the purpose of the study.

Table 4.11 Type of Employment

Type of Employment	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency/ (%)
Government	27	22	49 (24.5%)
Private	17	8	25 (12.5%)
Self-employed	19	16	35 (17.5%)
Unemployed	27	51	78 (39%)
Student	10	3	13 (6.5%)
Total	100	100	200 (100%)

The type of employment of Ao women shows that government employment is the most common type of formal occupation, with 49 respondents (24.5%)

working in this sector. Of these respondents, 27 are from developed villages and 22 from undeveloped villages. Employment in the government sector in any form of job is highly prized among the AOs because it provides stability, perks, and social security. The slightly higher number in developed locations may suggest that they have better access to the education and opportunities required for these roles.

The private sector accounts for 25 respondents (12.5%), with 17 from developed villages and only eight from underdeveloped villages. The low proportion of private sector jobs, particularly in underdeveloped areas, implies a lack of private enterprises and insufficient infrastructure to support private firms. Conversely, higher numbers in developed areas suggest increasing urbanisation catering for different needs, which creates more prospects for formal private sector employment. However, even in developed villages which are nearer to urban areas, private sector jobs remain a smaller segment than government jobs, indicating the dependence and preference of AO society on government for their employment prospects.

Self-employment is another important aspect of the economic landscape, with 35 respondents (17.5%) identifying as self-employed. This category has 19 respondents from developed villages and 16 from underdeveloped villages, indicating a fairly balanced distribution. In underdeveloped areas, self-employment is associated with traditional livelihoods such as farming, small-scale businesses, and handicrafts, whereas in developed areas, it encompasses a wider range of entrepreneurial ventures, indicating greater access to markets and financial resources. The findings highlight the significance of self-employment as a source of income in areas with few conventional job possibilities, contributing to the betterment of the socioeconomic profile of those who depend on it.

Unemployment is the most prevalent category, with 78 responses (39%), including 27 from developed and 51 from underdeveloped villages. The much higher unemployment rate in underdeveloped villages indicates long-standing

socioeconomic difficulties, such as a lack of access to higher education and employment opportunities. However, the fact that 27 respondents in developed villages are unemployed suggests that, even in locations with greater infrastructure and resources, job creation has not kept up with demand. The ratio also indicates a heavy reliance on government sector jobs, which cannot accommodate everyone. Lastly, the occupational distribution table includes students as a separate category, accounting for 13 respondents in total.

The government sector and employment remain a pillar of economic stability and employment in both developed and underdeveloped villages, providing financial security and social benefits. However, the limited representation of private sector jobs, particularly in rural areas, emphasises the importance of the private sector and economic diversification. Furthermore, self-employment provides an alternative for many households, particularly in underdeveloped villages where employment prospects are limited. This analysis of the employment status of the respondents reveals substantial disparities between developed and underdeveloped villages. While developed villages have higher participation rates in formal employment sectors, underdeveloped villages continue to face issues such as high unemployment and dependency on self-employment.

4.9 Income of the Individual and Family

Following the examination of employment status and types of employment, it is essential to examine the respondents' income. Income, which is the earnings obtained through wages, salaries, or investments, is a key indicator of an individual's financial stability and economic status (Berzofsky et al., 2014). Employment status and income are important factors in determining respondents' socio-economic profile since they have a direct impact on lifestyle, access to resources, and social mobility.

Income frequently determines social networks and educational opportunities, affecting one's socioeconomic trajectory, influencing living standards, possibilities for better education, and access to healthcare and other resources

(Galobardes et al., 2006). As such, in Table 4.12, the income is classified into seven categories ranging from below ₹10,000 to ₹51,000 and above, offering a comprehensive picture of the economic situation among Ao women respondents. By assessing these income categories, we can acquire a greater understanding of the financial implications of their nature of employment, as well as how income distribution relates to occupational responsibilities, economic stability, and property ownership in the society.

Table 4.12 Monthly income of the respondents

Monthly Income	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency (%)
Below ₹10,000	1	Nil	1 (0.5%)
₹11,000 - ₹20,000	16	16	32 (16%)
₹21,000 - ₹30,000	27	19	46 (23%)
₹31,000 - ₹40,000	7	5	12 (6%)
₹41, 000 - ₹50,000	7	5	12 (6%)
₹51, 000 and above	5	1	6 (3%)
Unemployed	27	51	78 (39%)
Student	10	3	13 (6.5%)
Total	100	100	200 (100%)

The monthly income of Ao women interviewed indicates that only one respondent (0.5%) from a developed village has an income of less than ₹10,000. This minimal representation implies that extreme poverty is not common among the sampled population. The following income range (₹11,000-₹20,000) had 32 respondents (16%), evenly split between developed and underdeveloped villages. This category is mostly comprised of respondents who are self-employed with traditional livelihoods such as farming, small-scale businesses, and handicrafts or informal jobs, reflecting the restricted economic prospects and financial constraints in both regions.

The largest income category, ₹21,000-₹30,000, includes 46 respondents (23%), with a higher concentration in developed villages (27 respondents) than underdeveloped areas (19 respondents). This group mostly includes middle-

income earners, such as those employed in low-level government jobs or the private sector, and some self-employed entrepreneurs. The lower representation in underdeveloped villages highlights the lack of steady, well-paying employment opportunities in these locations.

The income ranges of ₹31,000-₹40,000 and ₹41,000-₹50,000 each account for 12 respondents (6%), with developed villages having a slight advantage (7 respondents) over underdeveloped villages (5 respondents) in both the income ranges. These groups represent households with greater financial stability, who earn their income mostly via higher-level government jobs. The distribution shows that economic advantages in developed areas enable a greater number of respondents to achieve this level of financial security.

The highest income category, ₹51,000 and above, has only six respondents (3%), predominantly from developed villages (5), compared to only one respondent from an underdeveloped village. The smaller proportion of this category reflects the rarity of high-income households, particularly in underdeveloped villages where socioeconomic restrictions and limited access to high-paying job opportunities is mostly because of educational impediments and lack of amenities.

The unemployed category accounts for 78 respondents (39%), 27 from developed villages and 51 from underdeveloped villages, and represents a sizable number of respondents who are not employed and, as a result, do not earn an income. This high unemployment rate, particularly in underdeveloped villages, highlights ongoing issues such as limited job opportunities, inadequate infrastructure, and dependence on the government sector.

Additionally, 13 respondents (6.5%), as seen from the preceding analysis, are students who are currently pursuing their education. This higher number of students in developed locations indicates more access to educational opportunities and resources, whereas the lower representation in undeveloped areas reflects economic limits and geographical hurdles to pursuing higher education.

Overall, the monthly income distribution of the respondents reveals significant economic disparities between the developed and underdeveloped villages. Developed villages have a higher concentration of respondents in the middle- and upper-income groups, indicating greater access to steady and lucrative employment opportunities. In contrast, underdeveloped villages are characterised by lower-income households and a higher frequency of unemployment, emphasising the lack of opportunities and amenities available to them. Addressing these disparities requires specific measures such as increasing access to higher education; better infrastructure and connectivity would create more job opportunities in underdeveloped areas, and facilitating market access for small businesses would help contribute to increasing income levels in underdeveloped areas.

Occupational composition and income are important indicators of an individual's socioeconomic standing and financial stability. However, a more comprehensive understanding of economic well-being can be achieved by examining the family income, which encompasses the combined income of all family members. Family income reflects the economic contributions made by multiple family members, demonstrating the household's overall financial standing. It has a wide-ranging influence on daily life, including access to healthcare, education, housing, and other essential amenities. In the following section, we will examine the family income of the respondents to gain insight into the financial situation of the households surveyed.

4.9.1 Family Income

Family income refers to a household's overall financial earnings, which include wages, salaries, and any other income streams contributed by all family members. It is a significant indicator in socio-economic determination, as it is often utilised to assess household stability and access to resources. Arshad et al.'s (2002) research on household socio-economic characteristics found that family wealth is directly related to health, academic success, and psychological well-being, while Christelis et al. (2006) highlighted that family income has a

significant impact on lifestyle choices and long-term wealth accumulation, making it critical for understanding economic disparities and their implications for different families when it comes to property and ownership. Accordingly, table 4.13 below on the following page presents the family income distribution of the respondents for the study.

The family income distribution is classified based on three key aspects: income source, income range, and income category. The source of income varies across different marital status groups. For married respondents, the emphasis is on combined spousal income, whereas for unmarried, widowed, divorced, and single respondents, their parents' combined income or their own income is indicated. The income range is further categorised into three levels: low (below ₹20,000), medium (₹21,000-₹50,000), and high (above ₹51,000). Within each range, the income category further differentiates respondents based on the estimated number of earners in a household—ranging from 0-2 (low), 3-6 (medium), and 7-13 (high). This categorisation was determined by aggregating the parental income or highlighting the individual income of respondents as classified under the monthly income range in Table 4.11.

Table 4.13 Family Income

Marital Status	Income Source	Income Range	Income Category	Developed Frequency/%	Undeveloped Frequency/%	Total Frequency/%	Total Respondents
Married	Combined Income (Spouses)	Low (Below 20,000)	0-2	4	9	13 (6.5%)	135
		Medium (21,000-50,000)	3-6	34	45	79 (39.5%)	
		High (Above 51,000)	7-13	29	14	43 (21.5%)	
Unmarried	Own	Low (Below	0-2	0	2	2 (1%)	9

	Income/ Parental Income	10,000)					
		Medium (11,000- 40,000)	3-6	1	5	6 (3%)	
		High (Above 41,000)	7-13	0	1	1 (0.5%)	
Widow	Own Income	Low (Below 10,000)	0-2	4	8	12 (6%)	19
		Medium (11,000- 40,000)	3-6	4	3	7 (3.5%)	
		High (Above 41,000)	7-13	0	0	0 (0%)	
Divorced	Own Income	Low (Below 10,000)	0-2	0	1	1 (0.5%)	1
		Medium (11,000- 40,000)	3-6	0	0	0 (0%)	
		High (Above 41,000)	7 - 13	0	0	0 (0%)	
Single	Own Income/ Parental Income	Low (Below 10,000)	0-2	2	3	5 (2.5%)	36
		Medium (11,000- 40,000)	3-6	19	7	26 (13%)	
		High (Above 41,000)	7 - 13	3	2	5 (2.5%)	
Total				100	100	200 (100%)	200

The family income distribution among respondents varies significantly based on marital status, income source, and regional differences. Married respondents, with the combined income of the spouses, constitute the majority with 135 respondents. Predominantly, they fall within the medium-income range of ₹21,000 to ₹50,000, with 79 respondents (39.5%) in this category. Within this range, 34 respondents are from developed villages and 45 from

underdeveloped villages, indicating a higher proportion of married individuals with middle-range incomes in underdeveloped villages. Additionally, 43 married respondents (21.5%) belong to the high-income category (above ₹51,000), with a greater concentration in developed villages (29 respondents) compared to underdeveloped villages (14 respondents). This suggests that developed villages provide better employment opportunities and financial stability. Meanwhile, only 13 married respondents (6.5%) fall into the low-income category (below ₹20,000), with four from developed villages and nine from underdeveloped villages, highlighting that financial hardship is more prevalent in underdeveloped areas.

For the nine unmarried respondents, whose income is either their own or supported by parents, the majority (6 respondents, or 3%) fall within the medium-income category. Of these, five are from underdeveloped villages and only one is from a developed village, indicating that most unmarried women rely on their own earnings or parental support. Furthermore, only one unmarried respondent (0.5%) from an underdeveloped village belongs to the high-income category, while two respondents (1%) from the same region fall into the low-income category, indicating economic vulnerability among some unmarried individuals.

Among the 19 widowed respondents, 12 respondents (6%) are in the low-income category. This includes a higher number from underdeveloped villages (8 respondents) compared to developed villages (4 respondents), indicating that financial challenges are more prevalent among widows in rural areas. Additionally, seven widows (3.5%) fall within the medium-income category, with four from developed villages and three from underdeveloped villages. However, none of the widowed respondents belong to the high-income category. This underscores the financial difficulties faced by widowed women, who often rely on their own earnings or support from family members.

The sole divorced respondent (0.5%) is classified within the low-income category and resides in an underdeveloped village. This reflects limited

economic opportunities for divorced women, who may face financial constraints due to the lack of spousal financial support.

Lastly, among the 36 single respondents, whose income is either their own or supported by parents, the majority (26 respondents, or 13%) fall within the medium-income category. Of these, 19 are from developed villages and seven are from underdeveloped villages, highlighting better economic prospects for single respondents from developed areas. Additionally, five single respondents (2.5%) belong to the high-income category, with three from developed villages and two from underdeveloped villages, suggesting that some single individuals enjoy financial stability. Conversely, five single respondents (2 from developed villages and 3 from underdeveloped villages) also fall into the low-income category, indicating financial dependence on parental support or low-paying jobs.

The analysis of family income distribution highlights clear regional disparities. Married respondents had more stable income due to their combined spousal earnings, whereas widows, unmarried, divorced, and single respondents face more financial insecurity, particularly in underdeveloped villages. The findings indicate that marital status and regional economic conditions have a significant influence on financial security and household income, with developed villages providing better financial stability and prospects for higher income. Undeveloped villages tended to suffer due to remote locations, lack of better employment prospects, and sound financial access, and hence had lesser economic stability.

Family income also affects land ownership, and these two factors are intertwined facets of economic well-being. Higher family incomes often allow households to purchase and maintain land, which can be a valuable asset and source of economic stability. Land ownership not only provides a place to live but can also be used for agricultural and farming purposes, business ventures, or return-orientated investment. Conversely, owning land can increase a family's income through productive use or income generated through rent,

improving their financial situation. In the following section, we will examine the land ownership status of the respondents, including the size of their land and the implications for their socioeconomic status.

4.10 Size of land owned

In tribal communities, land is a vital element for their livelihoods and reflects the prosperity and status of an individual (Mehta & Singh, 2021). For the Nagas, as with other tribal groups, land holds paramount significance as a status indicator (Lanu Longkumer & Jamir, 2012). It is not only essential for their survival but is also inherently linked to their economic, social, political and cultural systems, none the less their identity. Moreover, it is not only a determinant of their social status, but also an important criterion for determining the status of citizenship within a village, where the roots of all Nagas are anchored (Jamir, 2015). Consequently, owning land, whether acquired or inherited is imperative for all Nagas (Jacobs, 1998).

Similarly, In Ao society the identity of the people, the clan and the village depends on the land. However, the inheritance system is patriarchal in nature. The father as the head of the family, holds ownership the ancestral and clan land. After the father passes away, the land is inherited by his sons, and in the absence of a son, it passes to the father's male relatives, such as uncles or their sons or to the next male kin. As a result, daughters and women are excluded from inheriting landed property, particularly ancestral and clan land. This practice is deeply rooted in Ao culture and tradition and is an intrinsic part of their Customary Law, which encompasses the moral, religious, and social codes that govern the people.

Ao Customary Law defines gender roles, with men having exclusive rights to landed property inheritance and maintaining male dominance in land ownership (Jamir, 2015). As such, gender inequality in land ownership and control is an integral part of Ao and broader Naga inheritance laws and practices.

However, since Ao women cannot inherit or own the ancestral and clan land, under this heading we will see whether women own any landed property or not, be it ancestral and clan land or acquired property, as in socio-economic contexts, land plays a crucial role in determining wealth, status, and economic opportunities within communities (Lambin & Meyfroidt, 2010). It serves as a significant measure of socio-economic capacity for both individuals and families, offering valuable insights into their economic standing. Accordingly, Table 4.14 presents the distribution of land ownership among the sampled respondents

Table 4.14 Land Ownership

Land ownership	Property Kind	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency/ (%)
Yes	Ancestral	Nil	Nil	Nil
	Acquired	17	4	21 (10.5%)
No		83	96	179 (89.5%)
Total		100	100	200 (100%)

Of the 200 respondents interviewed, only 10.5 per cent (21 respondents) reported owning land, with 17 respondents from developed villages and only four from underdeveloped villages. Notably, none of the respondents reported owning ancestral land, reflecting the traditional Ao Naga inheritance system, which prohibits women from inheriting or holding ancestral and clan land. Instead, the entire 10.5 per cent of landowners acquired their properties by purchasing or through other means, indicating that land ownership among the sampled women is primarily a result of individual economic efforts rather than inheritance.

This disparity suggests that respondents in developed villages have a relatively better chance of acquiring and owning land, either jointly with their husband or on their own, due to closer proximity to town areas, improved access to financial resources, and better economic prospects. In contrast, the low number of landowners in underdeveloped villages demonstrates the socioeconomic barriers to land acquisition, such as financial constraints, geographical challenges, and most importantly, the fact that people in villages tend to retain

their land while acquiring properties in urban areas. Furthermore, those who do own land, whether from developed or underdeveloped villages, have predominantly acquired these properties in urban areas like Dimapur and Mokokchung town and look forward to migrating after constructing buildings on their own. There was no evidence of land acquisition or accumulation of land in or around the village they were living in.

Most importantly, the majority of respondents, 89.5 percent (179 respondents), do not own land, with 83 respondents from developed villages and 96 respondents from underdeveloped villages. In both developed and underdeveloped villages, the high proportion of non-landowners reflects the Ao societies' inheritance and land ownership system, in which traditional institutions prioritise collective land management over individual ownership. The land is jointly owned by the clan and men in general, and women do not have the right to either inherit or own ancestral and clan land. Moreover, the high percentage of non-landowners highlights the struggles respondents face in acquiring private properties, particularly due to economic constraints and structural barriers to land ownership. Based on the above analysis, Table 4.15 further examines the size of the land owned by the respondents, offering more detailed information about the distribution of land ownership and its socio-economic implications.

Table 4.15 Size of land Owned

Size of Land Owned	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency/ (%)
Less than 1 Bigha	3	1	4 (2%)
1 Bigha	8	3	11 (5.5%)
2 Bigha	5	Nil	5 (2.5%)
3 Bigha	1	Nil	1 (0.5%)
None	83	96	179 (89.5%)
Total	100	100	200 (100%)

The distribution of the size of land owned among the respondents reveals significant disparities. As shown in Table 4.14, only 10.5 per cent (21 respondents) of the 200 surveyed own land, while the vast majority, 89.5 per cent (179), do not. Moreover, the size of the land holdings varied from less than one *Bigha* to three *Bighas*, with one *Bigha* approximately equal to 14,400 square feet (1,337.8 square metres).

Among those who own land, the most common landholding size is one *Bigha*, with 11 respondents (5.5%) owning this size plot. Eight of these respondents are from developed villages, and three are from underdeveloped villages. This suggests that even among landowners, most hold relatively smaller plots. Ownership of land larger than 1 *Bigha* decreases significantly, with only 5 respondents (2.5%) owning two *Bighas* and just one respondent (0.5%) owning three *Bighas*, all of whom are from developed villages. Additionally, four respondents (2%) own less than one *Bigha*, with three from developed villages and only one from an underdeveloped village.

A noticeable difference in land ownership and size exists between developed and underdeveloped villages. Developed villages have a significantly higher number of landowners, with 17 respondents owning land, compared to only four in underdeveloped villages. Moreover, ownership of land exceeding 1 *Bigha* is exclusive to developed villages, indicating better access to financial and socio-economic opportunities. The size of land owned not only serves as a significant indicator of their economic standing and access to essential resources, but also highlights differences in landholdings among women landowners themselves.

This analysis of land ownership reveals significant disparities between developed and underdeveloped villages. Developed villages have a higher number of landowners, indicating improved access to resources and other opportunities, while underdeveloped villages are still hampered not only by economic but also cultural restraints as well. The dominance of non-

landowners in both regions also highlights the larger issues of gender inequality in land ownership and inheritance practices in Ao Naga society.

4.11 Overview

This chapter focuses on examining the socioeconomic profiles of respondents from four villages in Mokokchung District: Ungma, Mopungchuket, Khar, and Molungkimong. It highlights how socioeconomic characteristics such as age, marital status, religion, education, family size, employment and income influence the type of housing and household assets owned as well as the land owned. These characteristics are presented not just as demographic data, but as factors in understanding the socioeconomic profile of women in Ao society, as well as the similarities and differences among the sampled respondents. Ultimately, this chapter will serve as the foundation for understanding the respondents' behavioural characteristics, perspectives, and attitudes towards property ownership, its inheritance process, and the cultural practices in the chapters that would follow.

By analysing the respondents' economic statuses, this chapter presents a comprehensive picture of their situations. It emphasises how economic activity and status are found to understand property ownership and access to assets. Examining these socioeconomic characteristics provides a better understanding of the respondents' economic and social standing, which in turn influences their attitudes and behaviours towards property ownership and inheritance. Through this analysis, we acquire a greater understanding of the economic and social forces at work in the four villages studied, offering valuable insights into the broader context of property ownership and socioeconomic status.

1. The age distribution of respondents reveals significant demographic insights. Younger respondents (21-30 years) represent the smallest category, consisting largely of students currently pursuing their education and are more prevalent in developed villages, suggesting patterns of migration for better education and employment

opportunities. Conversely, middle-aged respondents (31-40 years) were evenly distributed across both the regions, and many were in the process of raising their families. A sizable proportion belonged to the 41-50 age group, which was defined by their peak earning years and the stage at which they acquired properties jointly with their spouses. Moreover, the largest age group, 50 years and older, was more concentrated in underdeveloped villages, emphasising younger generations' rural-urban mobility in search of better employment opportunities and educational facilities for their children. The analysis underscores age as an important variable determining property ownership, inheritance, and socioeconomic stability. Younger populations in developed villages have better access to modern education, amenities, and employment opportunities, whereas underdeveloped villages have a higher proportion of elderly populations. This age distribution not only highlights potential socioeconomic differences but also the impact of age on property ownership and inheritance patterns, demonstrating how socioeconomic stability and opportunities vary across different age groups.

2. Marital status profoundly impacts the social status of the respondents, especially in the context of property inheritance. The majority of respondents (67.5%) are married, evenly distributed between developed and underdeveloped villages, highlighting marriage as a key factor in shared financial resources leading to socioeconomic stability and resulting in joint property acquisition. Unmarried respondents (2%) who are of marriageable age, yet remain unmarried or spinsters in other terms, were predominantly from underdeveloped villages, reflecting cultural norms in which unmarried women frequently stay with their parents to care for them. Similarly, widows (9.5%) faced vulnerabilities due to traditional norms that prevent women in Ao society from owning their late husband's ancestral property, leaving them reliant on their husband's or father's clan land for cultivation. They do not have the rights to the land but are given the privilege and usufructuary rights

to it for their sustenance. Furthermore, divorce is uncommon, accounting for only 0.5 per cent of all respondents, due to cultural stigmas that are attached to divorce and discouragement of separation. In contrast, single respondents (20.5%), mostly from developed villages, represent younger respondents who are not currently in a romantic relationship, such as dating, engaged, or married, and they are not yet economically settled. This analysis highlights how marital status intersects with traditional norms, influencing social status, property rights and socioeconomic dynamics, with married respondents being the most likely to own property jointly with their husband, whereas widows and unmarried women face significant barriers and difficulties.

3. In terms of family and household composition, all of the sampled respondents were from nuclear families, with 100 per cent representation across both developed and undeveloped villages. This prevalence reflects cultural traditions in Ao society, where newlywed couples start their own households after marriage, resulting in smaller family units. This nuclear family structure has significant influence on property ownership patterns, as couples acquire properties together, utilising their shared income and resources, underscoring the role of family type in influencing socioeconomic stability and property acquisition practices. Moreover, in all the households, the husbands and fathers were the heads of the family, reflecting Ao society's patriarchal nature.

When it comes to the distribution of household sizes, most families were medium-sized units, with 3-5 individuals making up the vast majority of the sample. Specifically, four-member households were the most common, accounting for 34.5 per cent of responses, followed by five-member households (27.5%). Smaller households with (1-2) members are more common in developed villages, reflecting newlywed couples with no offspring yet or widows living alone. Households with (6-8) persons were uncommon, with only (4%) of respondents having

six members in their family, and only one household (0.5%) had eight family members, which was located in an underdeveloped village. This distribution demonstrates the prevalence of medium-sized nuclear families as well as the financial challenges that bigger families frequently confront, particularly in underdeveloped regions.

Furthermore, the analysis of dependent family members sheds light on the economic burdens within households. Families with no dependants made up 7.5 per cent of responses and were primarily widows or newly married couples without children. Households with (1-2) dependents account for the majority of respondents (69%) and were evenly divided throughout developed and underdeveloped villages. Larger households with 3-4 dependents are more common in underdeveloped villages, reflecting traditional family structures and higher dependency ratios. Moreover, only one household reported having seven dependants, highlighting the rarity of such larger family sizes. These trends demonstrate the economic benefits of smaller families, as fewer dependents allow for better resource allocation and economic stability, whereas larger families frequently face financial constraints, affecting their overall socioeconomic standing and ability to invest in property acquisition or maintenance.

4. The type of accommodation indicates that 64.5 per cent live in semi-pucca houses, a transitional dwelling form made of a combination of temporary and permanent materials, evenly spread throughout developed and underdeveloped villages. Pucca houses, which are entirely composed of durable materials, account for 19 per cent of respondents, with a higher concentration in developed villages (22 households) than in underdeveloped ones (16 households), indicating more financial stability and resource availability in developed regions. Conversely, kuccha dwellings, made of temporary materials like bamboo and thatch, are more common in underdeveloped villages (24) than in developed ones (9), highlighting the economic constraints and limited infrastructure in rural areas. This analysis shows how housing

standards vary with economic prospects. Pucca houses signify stability, while kuccha dwellings indicate financial challenges. Meanwhile, the presence of semi-pucca housing highlights ongoing efforts to improve the standard of living in both regions.

5. Different households also owned different assets according to their socioeconomic status, indicating their financial stability, preferences, and lifestyle choices. Mobile phones are the most widely owned asset, with 100 per cent ownership in both developed and underdeveloped villages, highlighting their role as an essential communication tool and access point to digital services. Similarly, gas and induction stoves were equally widespread, with 92 per cent of respondents owning them, highlighting their importance as daily necessities. Televisions are owned by 81 per cent of households, with higher ownership in developed villages (88 households) than in underdeveloped ones (74 households), indicating better financial capacity in developed villages. However, refrigerators and washing machines show notable disparities, with 55 households in developed villages and 49 households in underdeveloped villages, respectively, indicating their prevalence in developed villages, where financial stability and access to facilities support such investments. Conversely, computer and laptop ownership illustrates a digital divide, with only 33 per cent of households owning these devices (45 households) in developed villages compared to underdeveloped ones (21 households). Livestock ownership is substantially higher in underdeveloped villages (77 households) than in developed ones (25 households), highlighting its role in subsistence living and rural livelihoods. This analysis focuses on general patterns and regional differences, demonstrating how economic opportunities and priorities influence asset ownership. While developed villages have better access to modern conveniences, underdeveloped villages rely more on traditional resources like livestock to support their households.

6. Religion plays a crucial role in shaping the cultural and social identity of the Ao community. All 200 respondents (100%) identified as Baptist, reflecting the historical and cultural influence of early American Baptist missionary efforts. The strong presence of Ao Baptist Arogo Mungdang (ABAM) and its ongoing efforts as a church organisation have also firmly incorporated the Baptist faith into the social and spiritual fabric of the community, solidifying its position as the major religious denomination among the Aos. This shared religious affiliation underscores its significance as a unifying force among the Aos. Durkheim's view of religion as a reflection of clan solidarity and collective identity is apparent in the inheritance practice of the Aos, where attachment to ancestral land is similar to religious rituals in reinforcing community ties. Beyond its religious significance, religion has also significantly influenced education within the Ao community. Baptist missionaries emphasised the crucial role of formal education in fostering personal and societal growth, laying the foundation for the community's advancement in education, and this connection between religion, cultural identity, and education has its broader socioeconomic implications.
7. Education is an indicator of socioeconomic status, shaping opportunities for employment and financial stability. High school education was the most prevalent qualification attained by the sampled respondents (31.5%), with a higher concentration in underdeveloped villages (44 respondents) compared to developed villages (19 respondents). Primary education (8%) and secondary school graduates (22%) of the respondents reflect the basic levels of their educational qualification, with secondary education being equally represented in both regions. However, there is a noticeable difference in graduate and postgraduate educated respondents, with 32 graduates and 9 postgraduates from developed villages compared to 19 and three respondents, respectively, from underdeveloped villages. Furthermore, only one respondent from a developed village holds a Ph.D. degree.

Additionally, 6.5 per cent of respondents are currently pursuing their education, predominantly from developed villages (10 and 3, respectively). These trends illustrate the positive effects of better infrastructure and access to resources from developed villages, while underdeveloped villages far from urban areas confront challenges such as financial limits and geographic constraints. Consequently, higher educational attainment is associated with better economic outcomes and enhanced socioeconomic mobility.

8. Employment plays a crucial role in determining socioeconomic stability, with 54.5 per cent of respondents employed. Developed villages had a higher employment rate (63 respondents) than underdeveloped ones (46 respondents). This is because developed areas have better infrastructure, more education, and a wider range of job opportunities. In contrast, underdeveloped villages had fewer job opportunities, which led to higher unemployment rates (51 respondents compared to 27 in developed villages) and more reliance on traditional ways of making a living. Additionally, students account for 6.5% of the sample, contributing to the total of 200 respondents.

When it comes to the type of employment, government sector jobs were the most common form of employment among the respondents, accounting for 24.5 per cent of the respondents, highlighting their significance as a stable and respected form of employment in Ao society. Developed villages had a slight edge in government employment (27 respondents compared to 22 in underdeveloped villages), owing to better access to education and opportunities. However, private sector employment remains low at 12.5 per cent with only 17 respondents in developed villages and even fewer in underdeveloped villages (8 respondents), indicating a preference for government sector employment and a lack of private enterprises. Self-employment, which accounts for 17.5 per cent of respondents, is more evenly distributed, reflecting its importance in providing livelihoods, particularly in areas with fewer formal alternatives. The high

unemployment rate (39%), particularly in underdeveloped villages, underscores the need for economic diversification, greater access to education, and job development to enhance economic stability.

9. The income distribution of respondents reveals significant disparities between developed and underdeveloped villages, reflecting differences in economic opportunities and stability. Developed villages have a higher concentration of middle-income earners (₹21,000-₹30,000) and higher-income earners (above ₹31,000), indicating better access to stable and well-paying jobs. Conversely, underdeveloped villages have more middle-income households (11,000-20,000) and a higher unemployment rate (51 respondents compared to 27 in developed areas), reflecting restricted employment opportunities and economic constraints and inadequate infrastructure. Although extreme poverty (below ₹10,000) is uncommon, the absence of respondents in higher income categories from underdeveloped villages highlights the challenges posed by inadequate infrastructure and limited access to education and resources. Moreover, developed villages have a higher proportion of students pursuing their education, indicating better access to resources and opportunity. These income variations necessitate specific interventions to improve economic prospects and bridge the gap between the two regions.

The analysis of family income distribution also reveals notable disparities, particularly based on marital status. The majority of respondents (135) are married and have a combined income from their spouses. Of these, 39.5 per cent fall within the medium-income range (₹21,000-₹50,000), with more in underdeveloped villages (45) than in developed ones (34). However, high-income respondents (21.5%) are concentrated more in developed villages than in underdeveloped villages (29 and 14, respectively). Unmarried, widowed, and single respondents, often relying on their own or parental income, exhibit higher financial vulnerability, especially in underdeveloped areas. 12 out of 19 widows (6%) are low-income earners, primarily from

underdeveloped villages, and no widows or divorced respondents are in the high-income category. Single respondents show better economic prospects in developed areas, with 19 out of 26 (13%) belonging to medium-income earners from developed villages.

10. Land ownership among the respondents reveals significant disparity, with only 10.5 percent (21 respondents) owning acquired land in urban areas, primarily concentrated in developed villages (17 respondents) compared to underdeveloped villages (4 respondents). There was no evidence of land acquisition in and around the village they were living in, and those who do own land, whether from developed or underdeveloped villages, have predominantly acquired these properties in urban areas like Dimapur and Mokokchung town. Moreover, respondents in developed villages have a relatively better chance of acquiring and owning land, reflecting better economic possibilities, financial access, and proximity to urban areas of the developed villages. However, the vast majority, 89.5 per cent of respondents in both regions, do not own land, illustrating the established tradition of Ao customary laws and patriarchal inheritance practices that prevent women from inheriting or owning ancestral and clan land. Additionally, economic constraints and cultural norms further limit private land acquisition, particularly in the underdeveloped villages.

The size of landholdings ranged from less than one *Bigha* to three *Bighas*, with most landowners holding smaller plots. The most common landholding size was one *Bigha*, with 11 respondents (5.5%), in which the majority of the respondents were from developed villages. Furthermore, ownership of land larger than one *Bigha* was exclusively reported in developed villages, as no respondent from underdeveloped villages owns land exceedingly more than one *Bigha*. These findings highlight systemic barriers to women's land ownership, emphasising the importance of addressing both economic inequalities and gender-based restrictions on property rights.

To conclude, in light of the respondents' socioeconomic profile, the following chapter will look into the gendered dynamics of property inheritance in both developed and underdeveloped villages, providing deeper insights into the nature of property ownership, control and decision-making by women in Ao society.

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CHAPTER V
OWNERSHIP STATUS, CONTROL AND DECISION-MAKING

5.0 Introduction

5.1 Property Ownership Status

5.2 Factors Influencing Property Ownership

5.3 Distribution and Control of Property

5.4 Property Rights and Gender

5.5 Conflict over Property Rights

5.6 Decision-Making and Empowerment

5.7 Overview

CHAPTER V

OWNERSHIP STATUS, CONTROL AND DECISION-MAKING

5.0 Introduction

The previous chapter examined the socio-economic profile of the respondents from the sampled villages, shedding light on demographics like age, marital status, religion and education, as well as economic indicators like employment, income, and land ownership. Understanding these is crucial for contextualising property ownership and inheritance dynamics in Ao society, where socio-economic factors significantly influence women's access to resources and property inheritance rights.

Women continue to face persistent discrimination in access to land throughout different societies (Agarwal, 2003; Allendorf, 2007; Alkire et al., 2013). Land is particularly significant for indigenous communities, as it not only serves as a primary source of income but also carries significant cultural and identity values (Roy, 2010). The exclusion of women from land and inheritance rights is deeply rooted in traditional and customary practices that dominate tribal societies, which reinforce gender disparities. Gender norms and expectations also limit women's access to and control over property, exacerbating their socio-economic vulnerabilities.

Lack of property and inheritance rights intensifies economic disadvantages for women, making them more vulnerable to lack of self-sufficiency, domestic abuse, and discrimination. On the contrary, obtaining these rights can promote economic stability, enhance decision-making ability, and strengthen women's roles within their households and communities. The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO, 2011) of the United Nations highlight the widespread gender inequality in land rights globally, underscoring the need for change. In line with this, Goal 5 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasises the importance of gender equality and equitable land rights for women. Studies have shown that allowing women to inherit property

promotes autonomy, empowerment and gender equality (Deininger et al., 2010; Roy, 2015; Anderson, 2018). However, at the same time, it is also crucial to understand the reasons behind the exclusion of women from rights to land.

This issue of gender and property inheritance is especially prevalent in Ao society, where patriarchal traditions have traditionally governed property ownership and inheritance practices, which limits their access to essential resources and opportunities. This chapter examines the complexities of inheritance practice through a gendered lens, focusing on how traditional practices, societal attitudes, and customary laws shape the inheritance rights of women in Ao society. By comparing the disparities and challenges between the developed and underdeveloped villages, this chapter provides a more profound understanding of women's status regarding property ownership in Ao society.

As stated in the third objective of the study, which is to examine and compare the status of Ao women in developed and underdeveloped villages in terms of property ownership, the following aspects are analysed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issue at hand: In the following sections, the perspectives, thoughts, and opinions of Ao Naga women from the sampled villages are explored across different themes, shedding light on their lived experiences and insights under 7 headings:

1. Property ownership status
2. Factors influencing property ownership
3. Distribution and control of property
4. Property rights and gender
5. Conflict over property rights and
6. Decision-making and empowerment.
7. An overview

Accordingly, under these headings, different perspectives are examined comparatively between the developed and underdeveloped villages, identifying

similarities and differences and the norms that define women's access to and control over property and its inheritance in Ao Naga society.

5.1 Property Ownership Status

Property is a set of rights and privileges that regulate the control of tangible assets by individuals or groups. The basic concept of property is that an individual or group of people has a recognised right to control things, subject to certain restrictions that prevent others from interfering in it. It involves possession and ownership of things or property and is governed by societal norms and customs (Yonai, 2007). However, it is essential to clarify that in this study, 'property' particularly refers to land.

In Ao society, property ownership is structured by patriarchal practices, prioritising male inheritance and limiting women's rights and access to land. Customary laws generally exclude women from owning and inheriting ancestral clan properties, reinforcing gender inequality in property ownership. Under this heading, an attempt is made to examine the property ownership status of Ao women by examining their ownership status as well as the kind of property and type of property they own.

Table 5.1 Property ownership status and kind of property

Ownership Status	Kind of Property	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency/ (%)
Yes	Ancestral	Nil	Nil	Nil
	Acquired	17	4	21 (10.5%)
No		83	96	179 (89.5%)
Total		100	100	200 (100%)

There is limited access to property ownership among women in Ao society, revealing that land remains entirely restricted, especially with no respondents inheriting or owning ancestral property. Instead, only 21 respondents (10.5%), 17 from developed villages and four from underdeveloped villages, reported

owning acquired property, reflecting a difference in property acquisition and its ownership between developed and underdeveloped villages in Ao society.

In contrast, the majority of 179 women respondents (89.5%) 83 from developed villages and 96 from underdeveloped villages, did not own any kind of property, highlighting the prevailing gender inequality in property ownership in Ao society. This clear disparity shows how women's ability to acquire and obtain property is hampered by cultural practices, patriarchal traditions and socio-economic limitations.

The qualitative narratives obtained from respondents offer meaningful insights into the social and cultural norms that restrict women from owning ancestral properties. Respondent 17 (underdeveloped village), highlighting the institutionalised exclusion of women from ancestral properties, stated:

“In our society, women do not own or consider inheriting ancestral properties. These rights are reserved for men alone, whether we want it or not. Our norms and traditional values are attached to it, and this has been practised and handed down for generations”.

This perspective was also shared by Respondent 187 (underdeveloped village), who pointed out:

“From our forefathers, in our tradition women do not have any right to such ancestral properties.”

Gender apart, women's marital and kinship affiliations further reinforce their exclusion from ancestral property ownership. An Ao woman marries outside her clan, and thus, the woman's ability to claim ancestral land gets dismissed as a part of the traditional customs. Respondent 140 (developed village) explained:

“Ao women do not own or claim any property because of our marriage system.”

The comment of Key Informant 19 helps us to understand this:

“In the event of an Ao woman who moves out after marrying outside the village, we give some land to her. Does that mean that her husband would come and occupy that land from another village?”

However, the notion that an outsider occupies land from another village or clan is not possible in Ao society, because every Ao village works as an independent nation. The husband from another village/clan is an outsider for all practical purposes.

Key Informant 16 thus stated:

“Every village has its own state and republic. Having its own land, geographical boundary, and administration, the judgement of the village council is final and binding. What unites Aos is the language spoken, the clothing and the cultural practices. But when it comes to administration, it runs its own state.”

Within that logic, the same Key Informant 19 again quipped that:

“It is not a question of discriminating against Ao women when they are not given property, as it is ordinarily understood. In the logic of our ancestors, they are from a different country. Instead, in Ao society, if we want to understand anything, there are many other reasons, but one thing we see is the patriarchal kinship system and the village autonomy. The combination of these two unquestionably justifies the logic of withholding land from women.

Patriarchy was explicitly cited as the underlying cause of women’s exclusion from property ownership. Respondent 148 (underdeveloped village) added,

“We are a patriarchal society. Women do not own landed or other ancestrally related properties. It is not in our custom.”

Based on the patrilineal inheritance structure, Respondent 24 (developed village) justified women's exclusion, arguing that ancestral land must remain within the male lineage to preserve clan identity.

“Women do not own ancestral properties to ensure that the land stays within the clan, as the family's or clan's name is taken from the father/husband's side.”

A key informant, an Asst Professor of Sociology from the same tribe, elaborated on this clan and kinship affiliation:

“We can see that men and women have different titles, and if a woman is given her parents' clan land and when she marries, their offspring will carry the husband's clan name. So, if the wife passes her property to her children again, that will become another clan's land. The identity of that very land loses its claimability.”

The following chart helps to understand this:

Clan 1 land is given to daughter → Daughter marries with a guy from Clan 2 → Offsprings will carry Clan 2 name → So if Clan 1 land is inherited by the offsprings from her mother then it will become the land of Clan 2.

The identity of Clan 1 land itself pales into insignificance. In order to maintain the clan homogeneity and identity, and more so because of such clan and kinship norms, women are refrained from inheriting land.

The general lack of ancestral property rights for women, along with the low rate of acquired property (17 in developed villages as against 4 in underdeveloped ones), shows how well-entrenched patriarchal norms are in Ao society. Respondent 38 (developed village) expressed:

“Women typically do not receive or inherit property solely because of their gender.”

And Respondent 138 (underdeveloped village) highlights the role of cultural socialisation in reinforcing the exclusion:

“Society teaches and socialises us that only men have the right to own property.”

Key Informant 17 commented:

“It is because we Aos still today in our practice live in Clan and Village lands. There is no individual landed property; that is why in our sense, since it is only clan and community lands, there is no part for women. And we live in a patriarchal society where only men inherit, rule and govern as well.”

While Respondent 200 (underdeveloped village), who described herself as a lowly, uneducated housewife, highlights the socio-economic limitations which further restrict women’s ability to acquire property:

“We Ao women do not have any rights to ancestral properties, and when it comes to acquired properties, how can I, a lowly uneducated housewife in a village without any source of income, acquire a property in my name?”

Thus, the perspectives of the respondents provide an understanding of the disparities in property ownership, shedding light on how patriarchal customs, clan norms, socio-economic limitations, and gender stereotypes shape and reinforce women’s exclusion from land rights and inheritance in Ao society. The cultural justification and customary laws further exacerbate the situation by ensuring male inheritance as an unquestioned norm, leaving women without any rights to land. The fact that the properties women own are not ancestral clan properties, but rather personally acquired properties, highlights the existing disparities, obstacles, and inequalities faced by women in Ao society.

Besides that, key informants further explained how property inheritance is practised in Ao society.

Key Informant 9 mentioned:

“Our society is patriarchal in nature, and descent is traced through the men. Moreover, we uphold the belief that men are superior to women because culturally our practices have been that way. Thus, when it comes to properties which are community/village/clan owned, since our descent is through men, only men had the right to inherit such properties.”

Key Informant 12 further stated that these are centuries-old customs, and answering that question would not be easy since our position within the system is very recent. How it started cannot be stated, but, on a very basic level, *“it has to relate to our political system.”* In the political system of the Aos, as far as men are concerned, there is no landless male in the village. Moreover, only individuals who own land are considered part of the clan, lineage, or village and have a voice in the Senso Mungdang. Those without land do not possess political status. They are not a bonafide Senso (citizen), nor can they become a member of the village council. Thus, Key Informant 12 commented:

“In the political system, women do not have any political rights. They are not a member of the Village Citizen (Senso). So, in a way women almost have the same status as a Bendanger-Outsider. Of course, we shouldn’t call them outsiders, but in a way, they resemble outsiders because they are not part of the Senso. Thus, the ownership of land and non-ownership are so intricately related to the political system that evolved over the ages.”

Another reason as to why property is not given to women in Ao society, according to Key Informant 19, is the agricultural economy and the land management system. He stated:

“We don’t want to divide the land. We want to retain it as much as possible because our economy was dependent on Jhum

cultivation, which requires shifting of the fields annually. They had to devise a system where the lands are not divided in every generation but remain intact as much as possible, and the way of doing that is to go by lineage land rather than every individual. That was the logic.”

To conclude, Key Informant 13 commented:

“On the outside everything looks good; women are given a place, their position, and due respect to women. That is how people would look from the outside, but actually from the inside, the real matrix of the society, what we see from the outside is very different from the inside actually. Inside the house and the community, the male doesn’t really count the women as on par with them. As a patriarchal society, we do understand that, but when we are talking about inheritance, women don’t have that much right. It does not belong to anyone, but it remains with the men alone.”

Besides the low property ownership status, it is important to further examine the types of property owned by the 21 respondents who reported owning acquired property to provide a clearer understanding of the specific type of property owned by the sampled respondents.

Table 5.2 Type of property owned

Type of Property	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency/ (%)
Land, building and Household assets	17	4	21 (10.5%)
No Property	83	96	179 (89.5)
Total	100	100	200 (100%)

A comparative analysis of the types of property owned by respondents in developed and underdeveloped villages in Ao society shows that only 21

respondents owned property, while the rest reported having no property ownership, as stated in the foregoing paragraphs. Among those who do own property, the type of property they owned included land along with buildings and household assets. The respondents acquired their properties either by inheriting their parents' acquired properties or through their personal financial efforts and capabilities, enabling them to construct their homes and purchase essential belongings.

Respondent 53 (developed village) illustrates the emotional importance of inheriting her parents' acquired property:

"I inherited a house with land from my late parents. The building, the land, and everything inside have all been with me for years. The possession gives me a sense of security."

Respondent 92 (underdeveloped village), expressing her financial independence, stated:

"I may not have inherited land traditionally, but through my determination, I now own property with a house and all the basic necessities. It makes me feel secure and empowered."

Respondent 101 (underdeveloped village), a widow sharing her experience, mentioned:

"I was permitted by my father to build a house on the clan land. Although I don't have the permanent right to the land, the building and everything inside, it has all been acquired by my own and built my life on it."

In contrast to the minority who own land, the greater majority of 179 respondents (89.5%), 83 from developed villages and 96 from underdeveloped villages, reported that they do not own any property at all. This inequality draws attention to the ingrained socio-economic and cultural barriers preventing women in Ao society from having access to ancestral properties.

Respondent 99 (underdeveloped village) stated:

“Every society processes specific norms and practices. In some societies, women have the right to inherit and own land, while in our society women don’t have that right. Their culture differs from our tradition. Thus, within our culture women predominantly do not own land unless it is acquired property.”

To support this, Key Informant 2 emphasised:

“According to Naga customary law, women are not allowed to inherit any ancestral family properties. It is only the son who has the right to inherit immovable properties. In the absence of sons, the daughter and mother cannot inherit the family property, but it passes on to the nearest male relative of the father’s side. It is the practice of every Naga tribe. Even today with so much advancement and awareness, we still follow the customary law concerning the inheritance practices.”

The analysis of property ownership in Ao society indicates major differences caused by societal norms and cultural practices. Developed villages demonstrate a higher frequency of acquired property ownership compared to underdeveloped villages, with 17 respondents owning property in developed villages and only four in underdeveloped ones. Overall, only 10.5 per cent of respondents own property, while the vast majority of 89.5 per cent do not. The fact that women primarily own personally acquired properties, rather than ancestral clan properties, highlights the ongoing challenges and inequalities experienced by women in Ao society.

In the following analysis, the means through which the respondents have acquired their property is explored, and given that Ao women are traditionally excluded from inheriting ancestral property, the cultural and structural factors that influence ancestral property ownership in Ao society are examined.

5.2 Factors influencing property ownership

Globally, the ownership of property by women is shaped by a complex interaction of legal, social, economic, and cultural factors. In rural South Asia, the disparity between men's and women's legal rights and actual ownership is determined by long-standing social, administrative, and ideological factors (Agarwal, 1994). Personal and household characteristics like age, marital status, and family income have an impact on the likelihood of women owning and controlling land in Southern Ethiopia (Bekele, 2017). Similarly, in Nigeria, cultural values, financial capability, and religious beliefs greatly influence women's access to property and land ownership (Popoola et al., 2023). Customary laws in South Africa prevent women from having the same access to land as men (Masuku et al., 2023). These challenges exist in India as well, although with specific regional differences like the matrilineal society among the Khasis and Garos in Meghalaya; however, in general, women's ability to own land is influenced by many factors at the individual, household, and community levels, but societal barriers are the main reason (Agarwal et al., 2021).

This heading focuses on the various factors that shape women's access to acquired property within Ao society. While the previous heading highlighted the disparities in ownership status and types of property owned by women, the present heading structured under four thematic sub-headings, examines the underlying factors that influence women's ability to own property. Specifically, the process of acquisition, eligibility criteria, and determinants of ownership are examined to provide a deeper comprehension of the customs and socio-cultural practices that define the property rights of women in Ao society.

The manner in which a property is acquired reflects not only cultural and gendered attitudes but also women's socio-economic capabilities. Women can obtain property by acquiring it or through ways of inheritance or as gifts. But these options are frequently constrained by patriarchal customs and economic

barriers. Inheritance practices continue to prioritise male heirs, limiting women's entitlements. Similarly, economic constraints may prevent women from acquiring properties. As such, the means or ways through which the acquired property was acquired by the respondents in the study is examined.

Table 5.3 Means of acquiring property

Means of Acquiring property	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency/ (%)
Purchased	13	2	15 (7.5%)
Will	3	Nil	3 (1.5%)
Permitted	1	2	3 (1.5%)
No Property	83	96	179 (89.5%)
Total	100	100	200 (100%)

The methods through which the respondents have acquired their property in Ao society were primarily through purchase, being given through a will, or being permitted to own or utilise the property. Notably, these patterns of acquiring properties varied differently. The most common means of acquiring land was by purchasing it, accounting for 15 respondents (7.5%). This pattern is significantly more prominent in developed villages, where 13 respondents acquired land, compared to only two in underdeveloped villages. The necessity of acquiring land stems from the broader cultural restriction which prevents women from inheriting ancestral property, pushing them to seek alternative means to acquire property. The respondents also emphasised that purchased land is often located in urban areas, as women cannot own or acquire the village lands due to traditional customs. Respondent 171 exemplifies this:

“Bought land in a town area. Land is not sold to women within Ao villages since it is all clan or village land. Only male village members can buy land within the village boundaries. So, I bought land in the town where women have no such restrictions if we can afford it.”

Property acquisition is also facilitated through marital partnerships, with women jointly purchasing land along with their husbands. This arrangement often provides financial security and stability for future generations. Respondent 92 (underdeveloped village) stated:

“After marriage, along with my husband, we bought land in Dimapur. Later it will be given to both our son and daughter.”

Another means of acquiring property, though significantly less common, is inheritance through a will. Only three respondents (1.5%) from developed villages reported acquiring property through a will, while no such cases were reported in underdeveloped villages among the sampled respondents. Respondent 85 (developed village) described a unique arrangement:

“The current land on which our house is built was inherited from my parents. Our family had only daughters, and my father gave each of the three of us a plot of land that he had acquired.”

Moreover, even though Ao women cannot own or inherit ancestral properties, they are given usufructuary rights to either their father’s or husband’s ancestral properties when the need arises. Women in Ao society are granted temporary rights to land under certain conditions, such as widowhood, but these rights remain conditional and do not translate into actual ownership. As such, temporarily owning property through permission is rare in both village types, with only three respondents (1.5%), one from developed villages and two from underdeveloped villages, reporting acquiring property through permission. Respondent 46 (developed village) shared her experience:

“As a widow, I was given the privilege to live in my father’s clan land. So, I built my house there. However, even if I was given the privilege, I don’t own the land; it is just in my name for now, and after I pass away, it will go back to my father’s clan.”

These accounts help us to understand how properties are acquired by women in Ao society, emphasising that ownership is often achieved through purchase

rather than inheritance. The predominance of property acquisition through purchase highlights that women actively seek ownership outside traditional customary practices, often turning to urban areas where laws are more flexible and clan control is less entrenched. However, inheritance through a will remains rare even in acquired properties, reinforcing patriarchal norms, while permission-based arrangements remain temporary and do not provide permanent security.

Ownership of properties is influenced by socio-cultural, economic, and legal factors. Economic factors such as income and employment opportunities also influence women's abilities to acquire and retain properties. Furthermore, women's ability to acquire the property they own is heavily influenced by their marital status, income, age and education as well. This subheading examines these interconnected aspects to better understand the factors that enabled the acquired property ownership of the respondents.

Table 5.4 Factors enabling acquired property ownership

Factors enabling acquired property ownership	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency/ (%)
Personal Income	6	Nil	6 (3%)
Income and Marital Status	7	2	9 (4.5%)
Parents will	3	Nil	3 (1.5 %)
Temporary Permission	1	2	3 (1.5%)
No Land	83	96	179 (89.5%)
Total	100	100	200 (100%)

The key factors that enabled the means to acquire property reveal stark differences between developed and underdeveloped villages. For those who own acquired properties, economic independence, particularly through personal income, plays a significant role, with six respondents (3.5%), all from developed villages, acquiring property solely based on their income, which enables women to bypass customary restrictions, albeit primarily in urban areas.

As Respondent 5 (developed village) noted:

“My income has played a major role in my ability to acquire the property that I own.”

Beyond individual earnings, marital status along with income played the greatest role in property acquisition, especially in developed villages, with seven respondents compared to only two respondents in underdeveloped villages, resulting in a total of nine respondents (4.5%) between the two. Respondents highlighted how their marriages enabled them to pool resources and acquire property jointly with their husbands. For instance, Respondent 101 (underdeveloped village) stated:

“Marrying into a supportive partnership definitely helped and gave me the possibility to acquire property.”

Similarly, Respondent 6 (developed village) stated:

“Contributed my part through the help of my parents when my husband and I acquired land in Mokokchung town to start our business.”

Likewise, Respondent 4 (developed village) also emphasised the role of marital partnerships in creating opportunities for joint ownership, saying:

“My marriage opened possibilities and resources that allowed me to acquire the property jointly with my husband.”

In addition to these factors, some respondents highlighted their personal determination and financial capability in acquiring property. Respondent 66 (underdeveloped village) illustrated this sentiment, explaining:

“I was determined to secure my future as well as for my children, and purchasing land was a way of doing it which was largely possible due to my financial capability.”

These responses highlight the interplay between marriage, economic collaboration, and property ownership, underscoring how spousal relationships empower women within their family.

Furthermore, inheritance through a parents will contribute to property ownership in only three cases (1.5%), all from developed villages. While rare, these cases, like the response from Respondent 85's earlier account of her father distributing acquired land to her daughters, demonstrate how some families navigate around patrilineal norms to ensure property access for women. Besides those factors, three respondents (1.5%), one in a developed village and two from underdeveloped villages, were given temporary ownership of the lands they own. These arrangements provide land use rights but do not guarantee permanent ownership. As seen with Respondent 46's widowhood situation, such provisions offer short-term security but do not necessarily translate to long-term property rights.

Overall, this analysis suggests that economic status and marital partnerships are critical determinants of acquired property ownership in Ao society. While personal income allows some women to evade restrictive customary practices, marriage and economic collaboration with their spouses play an equally crucial role in enabling access to property. However, patriarchal customs and men continue to largely dominate inheritance. These findings illustrate the importance of financial independence and familial support in shaping women's property ownership in Ao society.

When it comes to ancestral property inheritance, inheritance from parents is an important means of transferring property. However, women's rights to parental inheritance are often constrained by traditional practices and customary laws. In Ao society, as in many other patriarchal societies, male family members are typically prioritised in inheritance processes, leaving women with little access to parental and ancestral property. This subheading examines whether the respondents of the study have inherited any parental inheritance and the ways

through which it was inherited, offering light on the practices when it comes to property rights.

About the respondents who received parental inheritance, it can be seen that only three respondents (1.5%) from developed villages, out of the 200 respondents sampled, have inherited property from their parents. Notably, these three respondents, having only been from developed villages, have inherited their parents' acquired properties through a will, rather than ancestral clan properties. Not a single respondent with inheritance through a will could be found from undeveloped villages. As Respondent 53 (developed village) explained:

“We have family land that my parents bought in Mokokchung town. Along with my three brothers, I have one sister, and we were all given a share in the land that my parents own through their will. However, my brothers had a bigger share by virtue of them being men.”

In contrast, the predominant 197 respondents (98.5%) reported that they have not received any parental inheritance. When asked why, the respondents highlighted the customary practices in Ao society that prevent women from inheriting ancestral properties. The respondents also noted that their parents often did not own acquired properties, meaning there was little to inherit in the first place. Respondent 25 (developed village) reflected on this, stating:

“I have not received property from my parents, nor would I even receive any after my father passes away. I am an only child who is a daughter. My parents do not have any acquired properties. Plus, Ao women are not allowed to inherit ancestral property because of our customary practices.”

This sentiment was shared by Respondent 177 (underdeveloped village):

“It is not in our ‘Sobaliba’ (cultural practice). So, a woman does not get any property from her parents unless it is acquired property.”

Respondent 200 (underdeveloped village) also added that:

“In Ao villages we only have clan lands, and in our practice, it does not pass through women. So, what would I get from my parents? Plus, they are not that well off to have any acquired properties.”

The justification rooted in tradition and cultural norms as to why women cannot inherit or receive properties has also been echoed by many respondents. Respondent 163 (underdeveloped village) expressed the deeply ingrained nature of these practices:

“In our tradition women are not given properties, and we have been following that tradition. It has become our custom. I do not know and cannot say the reason why women are not given the right, but since it is our tradition and we have been practising and socialised that way, we have accepted it as the norm.”

Similarly, Respondent 170 (underdeveloped village) acknowledged that she does not know exactly why Ao women cannot inherit properties but offered an assumption and narrated that:

“We do not know why our forefathers did not give the rights to women, but we have been practising it from the beginning. However, to my understanding, or what I feel, is that since women are addressed or considered like leaves that go with the wind, she goes away with the men who marry her and does not come back. That is why I believe women are not given the rights. Moreover, women did not participate in headhunting at all.

Maybe all those reasons explain why women lacked rights, in my understanding.

Reinforcing this perspective, Respondent 171 (underdeveloped village) stated:

“From our forefathers’ time the roles of men and women were different, and the rights and privileges were different. We are a male-dominated society, and as such, only men were given the right to land.”

Key informants further emphasised why property is not given to women. As such, Key Informant 16 stated:

“In our culture ancestral property is not given because Aos follow a patriarchal form of society. Men dominated the society and rule over it in which women do not get involved. In fact, there was no inheritance for women. But the women were regarded as preservers of inheritance. They are considered as retainer but not owners.”

Similarly, Key Informant 7 emphasised that:

“Since the beginning of our tradition and culture, women not having the rights or privileges was not intentional. Things were such that everything depended on men. Such as Hunting, Head-Hunting, Protection of Village and taking care of Village Administration was with men and women were exempted from such. It was not the intention to keep women in a lower status than men, but the need for the involvement in the practices didn’t arise and practices was such that the responsibility was taken by men. This practice continued and passed down and as such the inheritance remained with men.

However, Key Informant 19 shared a different opinion. He stated:

“The examples of headhunting, tiger hunting and men risking their lives to protect the village entitled them the status or the privilege to inherit the land is absurd. Such reasoning reflects the interpretations of modern Aos and may not accurately represent the realities which happened during that time. From a human emotional viewpoint, would a father who risked his life for head hunting or tiger hunting then turn to his daughter and say she has no right to inherit land? Just because he went for tiger hunting does not mean he will love his son more than his daughter. Rather, if we want to understand anything, there are many other reasons such as the political structure and the values attached to land, but one thing we see is the Kinship system and its logic.”

Based on these narratives we can understand that Ao women are excluded from ancestral property inheritance, while access to acquired property is highly contingent on economic circumstances. Many respondents acknowledged that, even where acquired property inheritance is possible, few parents have such assets due to economic constraints and circumstances. Moreover, it can also be seen that some respondents did not fully understand why women are excluded but have nonetheless accepted the practice as a norm, demonstrating the extent to which these traditions have been internalised and perpetuated across generations.

Women’s eligibility to own property is also often dependent on their kinship status, family relations and patriarchy. These conditions usually place women at a disadvantage, making it difficult for them to inherit or own properties. In the previous analysis, it was seen that only three respondents have inherited their parents’ acquired properties through a will. The respondent’s perspective on who is eligible to own ancestral and acquired properties in Ao society is further examined to help understand how these conditions shape their access to land.

Table 5.5 Eligible to own ancestral properties

Ancestral Property	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency/ (%)
Father	25	20	45 (22.5%)
Son	8	11	19 (9.5%)
Husband	67	68	135 (67.5%)
Nephew	Nil	1	1 (0.5%)
Total	100	100	200 (100%)

The eligibility to own ancestral property in developed and underdeveloped villages reveals significant differences in who is eligible to own property among the family members. It, however, shows a universal consensus on gender disparity, as no women were considered to be eligible to own ancestral property. Among the 200 households, husbands, being the head of the family, are considered to be the predominant owners of ancestral properties in both developed (67 respondents) and underdeveloped (68 respondents) villages, accounting for 135 respondents (67.5%). This perspective represents the married respondents, and it also indicates that patriarchy and marital status play a defining role in property ownership, as men automatically have ownership rights over ancestral land by virtue of them being men and members of the clan. As Respondent 143 (underdeveloped village) explains:

“Only men are eligible to own ancestral properties because lineage is traced through men, and land is mostly with the clan.”

This perspective is further reinforced by Respondent 51 (developed village), who stated:

“The ancestral clan property belongs to my husband and our son alone. Our daughters are not eligible to own nor inherit the ancestral properties, as they belong with the male clan members alone.”

However, Respondent 186 (underdeveloped village) opined that property ownership is directly linked to historical male roles in warfare, arguing:

“Our forefathers gave their heads to protect and fight for the land, and the rights stay with men only; that is our Sobaliba. If it is given to women, it would go away with her.”

Following the husbands, fathers hold ownership of land, with 45 respondents (22.5%) sharing this opinion, comprising 25 respondents from developed villages and 20 respondents from underdeveloped villages. This category largely consists of single and unmarried individuals whose fathers retain control over their family’s ancestral property, reinforcing the notion that women, because of their gender, are excluded from property ownership, despite their direct ties to the family. As Respondent 60 (developed village) explained:

“My father has clan land like every male does. But since it is not in our tradition for women to own or inherit clan land, it is not given to me, nor do women own land in general.”

Significantly, sons of widowed women were eligible to own the properties after their husbands passed away, which was reported by 19 respondents (9.5%), eight from developed villages and 11 from underdeveloped villages. These highlight the exclusion of widows and women from land ownership. Respondent 42 (developed village) highlights her experience:

“We women in Ao society have no official right to receive or own our husbands’ property. After he passed away, the lands he owned are now in the hands of our son.”

Respondent 93 (underdeveloped village), also sharing her experience, stated:

“After my husband passed away, when his properties were distributed, our son was given his land, being the male member

of his father's clan. The house belongs to me till I am alive and well, but after I pass away, both the land and the house will belong to him."

Furthermore, one single nephew (0.5%) of a widowed woman in an underdeveloped village is eligible to inherit the ancestral land due to the absence of male offspring of the widow. This shows that, in such cases, inheritance is extended beyond direct descendants to male relatives within the same clan, ensuring that property remains within the clan and patrilineal structures. Respondent 44 (developed village) illustrates the depth of this tradition:

"We are strongly rooted to our tradition and culture, and from the beginning in our culture, for a woman, there is no right to inheritance or succession in matters related to land. Why not given? Because it is our Sobaliba, and that practice has been handed down where men and women have different privileges, mostly in land because it is community owned."

These perspectives highlight that eligibility to own ancestral property is significantly influenced by marital and kinship relations, as well as the patriarchal nature of Ao society, where property ownership is tied to male lineage and traditional norms of the society. Moreover, a similar inheritance pattern and practice prevail regardless of village types, emphasising that women are not eligible to own ancestral properties in Ao society.

Key Informant 2 highlights why it is important that only men have the right and access to ancestral properties. She argued that:

"We cannot always blame negatively about our Sobaliba. There are some good and some bad practices. But when it comes to inheritance, only men have the right to ancestral properties. I strongly stand and agree with that. As a result of the prevailing practice, our lineage, traditions and practices are maintained

and remain unaltered. Because of it we have a very clean Sobaliba.”

Unlike ancestral land, which is restricted to the male lineage, acquired properties obtained through personal income, marriage, or other inheritance ways, such as a will or present, present a more equitable right for all to own acquired property irrespective of their gender. Respondent 8 (developed village), who owns acquired property, mentions:

“Women are secondary when it comes to the process of inheritance. But when it comes to acquired properties, things become a different matter. Properties can be acquired by the parents and passed down to their daughter or the son as well as long as the parents decide on it.”

Key informant 4 explained the secondary status of women in Ao society. She stated:

“Secondary in the sense no one takes her name in society, which means she is an attachment, but that of course is because of our patriarchal system. Plus, we are not even considered a member of the Senso Mungdang. It is such a system that makes us secondary.”

Respondent 45 (developed village) also stated:

“In the ancestral clan land, since it is not the practice, women don’t have any ownership rights, and that is ok. But in acquired property, every individual, irrespective of gender, has the right. The parents, father, mother, daughter or anyone can acquire it, and it can also be passed down and inherited through a will without any prejudice.”

Respondent 94 (underdeveloped village) also shared the same sentiment:

“Let the ownership of clan or ancestral property be with men. But the family-acquired properties are different from clan properties. Irrespective of the gender, every individual can acquire and own it, and every offspring has an equal right to inherit that property.”

These narratives highlight that when it comes to acquired properties, every individual, irrespective of their gender or status, as long as they are able to, can acquire, own or inherit it. The workings or patterns of inheritance and rights to it vastly differ from the ancestral or clan properties. In the above analysis we have examined who are eligible to own the ancestral properties; next we will further examine what determines the right to own the properties in Ao society.

Determinants of ownership are the elements which influence who have the right to own and inherit the ancestral property. These include traditional practices, customary norms, and kinship ties that dictate the nature of ownership. The key elements that determine the rights to ownership in Ao society are examined, which helps to understand particularly how gender roles, traditional practices and inheritance patterns affect and determine women’s right to own properties.

Table 5.6 Ownership Determinants

Ownership Determinant	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency/ (%)
Clan	3	14	17 (8.5%)
Patriarchy	5	10	15 (7.5%)
Clan, Descent & Patriarchy	76	68	144 (72%)
Marriage & Self-Acquired	16	8	24 (12%)
Total	100	100	200 (100%)

The analysis reveals a predominant perspective on clan, descent, and patriarchal frameworks, with 144 respondents (72%) reflecting on this, highlighting the deep-rooted influence of traditional inheritance systems that prioritise collective familial affiliations and male-centred property

transmission. This view is more pronounced in developed villages, where 76 responses hold this opinion, compared to 68 respondents in underdeveloped villages. The combined influence of clan, descent, and patriarchy is particularly evident in the narrative of Respondent 192 (underdeveloped village), who stated:

“In our Ao society, especially in villages, everything is in the name of the clan. Land belongs to different clans in the village, and our practice is such that it is passed down through the men in the clan to maintain that distinct clan land. I, as a woman, have not received my father’s land. Moreover, my husband and I have only female offspring. As such, the properties we have will go to his next male kin. I personally do not feel much about that, since the practice has been that way and it will go on.”

Similarly, Respondent 40 (developed village) shared that:

“It has been the practice since our forefathers. Clan land or property is with men, and the privilege or right remains with their descendants who are men.”

Some respondents attributed it solely to clan (17 respondents, 8.5%) and patriarchy (15 respondents, 7.5%), opining that these elements work independently rather than in conjunction with each other. Remarkably, respondents from underdeveloped villages emphasised these factors more compared to respondents from developed villages.

Respondent 172 (underdeveloped village) articulates the rationale that prevents women from inheriting clan property, stating that:

“In our Sobaliba a woman has to marry someone from another clan, and to protect a clan’s property from going away to another clan along with her, property and inheritance such as land is not given to women. I believe that is the only reason we women do not inherit land.”

Respondent 11 (underdeveloped village) further reinforces the idea of clan ownership, noting that:

“There is no individual ownership of land. It is community and clan-based ownership, and parents do not have the right to let their daughters inherit those properties, as only male descendants of the clan can inherit it.”

Key Informant 8 emphasised that:

“The clan preserves all the rights. Like the title and the name given to the women going back to the clan after a woman passes away. All the rights and privileges are preserved by the clan.”

The patriarchal structure of property ownership, deeply rooted in historical traditions, is acknowledged by Respondent 141 (developed village), who mentioned:

“The long-standing societal framework that positions men as the head of the family and various societal institutions, the breadwinner and, realistically, the heir to an existing property. This doesn’t necessarily mean that women are considered inferior; rather, it has more to do with passed-down traditions and acquired mindsets.”

This perspective is also echoed by Respondent 106 (underdeveloped village):

“In our family, we have two daughters and one brother, who is the youngest. Since our society is patriarchal and the land belongs to the clan, our brother, solely because of his gender as a man, will inherit our father’s ancestral property. Even though he is not the eldest, he has the right to own and inherit the property as well as make decisions related to the land, whereas we, as women, do not.”

Within all that context, Key Informant 20 stated:

“Now it looks bad. But those practices did not originate yesterday. It originated a long time back. These practices came out because of a reason, and our ancestors knew that. We should not judge our ancestors based on our reality. We should look at them based on their reality.”

Similarly, Key Informant 5 mentioned that:

“I am sure our traditional and customary laws have a reason for why inheritance is only with men. I don’t think it has much to do with gender. But the kind of social system that we have, whereby land is connected to the clan system and kinship relationships, and how our society is structured for that system to work.”

Interestingly, beside those perspectives, 24 respondents believed that property ownership is instead determined by a combination of descent, marriage, and self-acquisition. While still less significant than the dominant determinants, this group of respondents reflects a growing recognition of individual property acquisition through marriage and personal efforts, indicating a shift towards more flexible ownership determinants rather than depending on ancestral property. Respondents from developed villages were more under this category (16 respondents), reinforcing the idea that personal initiative plays a role in shaping property dynamics. Respondent 51 (developed village), who acquired property jointly with her husband, stated:

“I have seen cases where women acquire property through marriage or personal earnings. While traditional norms still influence inheritance, factors such as our income and marriage offer more opportunities for independent land ownership. I personally own a plot of land jointly that I acquired with my husband, something that wouldn’t have been possible in the traditional inheritance practices.”

Another respondent, 174 (underdeveloped village), stated:

“Marriage and income have given me access to property that I wouldn’t have inherited from my family. My husband owns clan land, but we cannot pass that down to our daughter. So, we decided to secure our own land for our daughter in the town, which can be handed down to her without any restrictions.”

Overall, the analysis highlights the predominant role of patriarchy and customary practices in determining property ownership rights in Ao society, particularly in developed villages. While some variations exist, such as the recognition of marriage and socio-economic capabilities, male-centred clan inheritance remains the defining principle of inheritance in Ao Naga society, and the narratives of the respondents reflect a widely accepted belief that property ownership is a culturally driven practice sustained across generations.

In Ao society, women are excluded from inheriting or owning ancestral clan properties because of deep-rooted customary laws and patriarchal customs. Instead, they acquire property through personal income, joint purchases with spouses, or inheritance of their parents’ acquired properties via wills. While ancestral land is reserved for male lineage, women have usufructuary rights, allowing them temporary access to property for their needs, but without ownership privileges.

Eligibility to own ancestral properties in Ao society is determined by the patriarchal nature of the society, where men, being the heads of households as well as by virtue of descent and affiliation to their clans, determine their nature and the rights to it. Acquired properties, however, provide greater flexibility, allowing daughters to inherit them depending on parental will or personal acquisition. Moreover, despite socio-economic variations between developed and underdeveloped villages, patriarchal customs mostly dictate inheritance practices.

In the following section, how the properties are distributed and managed is further examined, illuminating the dynamics of control and ownership in Ao society.

5.3 Distribution and control of property

The distribution and control of properties are essential to understand the dynamics of resource allocation and decision-making within a society. Properties are distributed according to societal structures, and control over property signifies power, authority, and influence over its use and management. In many traditional settings, including Ao society, property distribution, ownership, and control are determined by cultural norms, familial structures, and societal hierarchies, which often reinforce gender disparities.

This heading under two sub-headings: the basis of entitlement to inheritance and who controls the properties are examined to gain a better understanding of how property is inherited, distributed and controlled within Ao society. These insights are crucial for understanding the broader implications that gender plays when it comes to such practices.

The basis of entitlement to inheritance provides a background to understand how property is distributed and inherited within families. Entitlement is often determined by gender, birth order, or kinship roles, with women typically receiving lesser or no properties compared to their male counterparts. Here, under this sub-heading, the practices and customs that define entitlement to inheritance is examined, providing insights into the underlying factors that influence women's property ownership as well as the larger implications for gender disparity in Ao society.

Table 5.7 Basis of entitlement to inheritance

Basis of Entitlement to inheritance	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency (%)
Clan and lineage	82	76	158 (79%)
Gender	18	24	42 (21%)
Total	100	100	200 (100%)

A striking 79% of respondents recognised a clan and lineage as the primary basis for inheritance rights. This highlights the deep-rooted tradition of collective ownership of land in Ao society, where inheritance is not an individual entitlement but rather a structured transmission of property within familial and clan members. The significance of this perspective and practice is more noticeable in developed villages, with 82 respondents supporting this view, compared to 76 in underdeveloped villages; however, it suggests that, even as villages develop, traditional inheritance practices remain central to property distribution. Respondent 176 (underdeveloped village) sums up this perspective:

“Every society has their own practices and customs, and in other societies women may be given the privilege and the right to inherit. We AOs have our own customs too, in which only men are given the right based on our clan and lineage.”

Key Informant 15 further stated that:

“When a new village is formed In Ao society, every clan gets their demarcated clan land and lives and farms in their clan lands. Thus, since our forefathers, the land belongs to the clan. There was no private ownership of land. It was only clan lands which do not get mixed up nor inherited by outsiders.”

On the other hand, the emphasis on gender as an independent determinant of inheritance was reported by 42 respondents (21%), with more respondents from underdeveloped villages sharing this view. Here, they opined that gender or being born as a male in society plays a crucial role in deciding the entitlement to inheritance, even before lineage or clan considerations come into play.

Here, Key Informant 10 mentioned that:

“This is because men have been considered the hunter, the warrior and the provider. Predominantly he was looked upon as

the leader and provider of every household or clan or village. This belief has continued in our patriarchal society since time immemorial, and women were the silent and unseen nurturers only within the four walls of the house.”

The perspectives of Ao women highlight the resilience of traditional inheritance structures, where the combined factors of clan and lineage as well as gender remain the predominant determinants of property transmission and the entitlement to inherit it. Also, in cases where there is no son born to a family, then the next male kin take control over the ancestral clan properties instead of the daughters. Moreover, the impression gathered from the field is that neither do the Ao women bother about the entitlement to ancestral properties nor are they yet ready to claim it. However, in the case of acquired properties and not ancestral property, it is handed over to the daughter ‘will’.

Accordingly, property distribution within the Ao community is male-centric. Property distribution addressed how assets and resources are distributed among the families and in different communities. In the case of this study, around 179 respondents (89.5%) reported that their ancestral property is primarily distributed via inheritance through their male offspring. Among them, 83 respondents from developed villages and 96 respondents from underdeveloped villages emphasised inheritance as the primary mode of property distribution.

Who controls the property is also important, including decision-making rights, usage, and transfer of ownership. How men and women in Ao society share control over property, both acquired and inherited, is examined, focusing on the societal and cultural factors that limit women’s autonomy and influence in property management.

Table 5.8 Controller of Property (Inherited and Acquired)

	Type of Property	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency/ (%)
Father	Inherited	24	20	44 (22%)
Husband		67	68	135 (67.5%)
Son		8	12	20 (10%)
Brother		1	Nil	1 (0.5%)
Total		100	100	200 (100%)
Jointly	Acquired	13	2	15 (7.5%)
Self		3	Nil	3 (1.5%)
No Control		1	2	3 (1.5%)
No Property		83	96	179 (89.5%)
Total		100	100	200 (100%)

The first part of the analysis focuses on ancestral properties and presents the comparative analysis of who controls the property in the family. Among the respondents, a notable pattern appears based on marital status. Unmarried or single respondents, accounting for 44 individuals (22%) of the total, reported that their father controls the ancestral properties, with 24 responses from developed and 20 from underdeveloped villages. In contrast, a significant majority of married respondents (67.5%, or 135 individuals) indicated that their husbands control the ancestral properties. This pattern was consistent across both developed (67 responses) and underdeveloped villages (68 responses). Furthermore, respondents who were divorced or widowed (10%, or 20 individuals) reported that their sons control the ancestral properties, with a slightly higher frequency in underdeveloped villages (12 responses) compared to developed villages (8 responses). Interestingly, one unmarried respondent from a developed village reported that their brother controls the ancestral property, as their father had passed away. No such cases were reported in underdeveloped villages. This analysis reveals that male family members, particularly husbands, fathers, and sons, hold a dominant position in owning, inheriting, and controlling ancestral properties. Respondent 18 (underdeveloped village) captures this reality:

“It is always either our father before marriage or my husband after marriage, and if my husband dies, then my eldest son would. I might give advice and my opinions as such, but it would not be in any way a decision-making power.”

The dominance of husbands as controllers of inherited properties indicates that even in marriage, property remains under male authority, limiting women’s autonomy and often making them reliant on their husband’s access to land for security. For unmarried women, the father also remains the primary controller of inherited property, highlighting that a woman does not have any entitlement, access or control over ancestral landed properties. Respondent 31 (developed village) elaborates:

“In our household, my father owns all the ancestral land. My brothers will inherit it, but I have never questioned it. We simply understood that daughters do not receive land nor have any say on it.”

In the case of widowed or divorced women, it is sons who take on the role of property controllers, highlighting the traditional customs of lineage-based inheritance. This indicates that in the absence of her husband, the control of property typically does not go directly to the wife but to her male children instead. Respondent 21 (developed village) remarked:

“After my husband passed away, our son took responsibility for our land. It has always been this way. I may have a say in it, but the property is officially controlled by sons once they are old enough.”

Also, in instances where brothers control the property instead of daughters, the pattern remains consistent where women are largely excluded from direct ownership and control of ancestral properties.

The data on acquired properties further highlights women's limited control over land beyond inheritance. Only 21 respondents own acquired properties, and among them, 15 respondents (7.5%) reported jointly acquiring property with their husbands, indicating that even in cases where land is obtained through personal effort, it is often shared with a male spouse rather than independently owned and controlled. The difference between developed (13 responses) and underdeveloped villages (2 responses) also indicates that development and economic opportunities also create more possibilities for joint property ownership, but overall, the numbers remain low. Respondent 66 (developed village) described:

“My husband and I purchased land together, and although it is officially in his name, we both make decisions regarding its use. It is not entirely equal, but it is better than having no claim at all.”

The most striking observation, however, is the low percentage of women who individually own property, with only three respondents (1.5%) in developed villages, with no cases reported in underdeveloped villages. This highlights the systemic barriers preventing women from acquiring land independently, which include financial limitations and deep-rooted societal norms restricting women from owning landed properties in Ao society. Respondent 174 (underdeveloped village) summarises this predicament:

“I never thought of owning land myself. It has always been something the men in my family handled, whether inherited or purchased. Women simply do not get involved in property decisions.”

While three more respondents (1.5%), one from a developed area and two from underdeveloped who were given permission to utilise the land had no control, the real ownership and control laid with the male members of the clan. This lack of ownership and control over property has direct consequences on women's economic ability, stability, and empowerment within the family, and

the lack of self-acquired property dictates that women stay reliant on the male members. Thus, the distribution and control of property within Ao society are deeply rooted in traditional practices, with clan, lineage, and gender being the key factors determining ownership rights. The fathers, husbands, and sons, or men in general, typically own and control the ancestral properties, and even within acquired properties, it is more common for women to share ownership with their marital partners rather than owning property independently. All these conditions perpetuate gender inequality, limiting the participation of women in economic and decision-making, and although some changes are observed in developed villages, traditional customs continue to play a role in the inheritance practices of Ao society.

In the next heading, the role that gender plays in the inheritance practice of Ao society is explored and examined closely.

5.4 Property rights and Gender

Inheritance practices are heavily influenced by cultural and societal structures that have evolved over time, which often reflect deep-seated gender inequalities. In many traditional communities, including Ao society, property distribution practices and norms favour male heirs, putting women at a disadvantage in terms of access to and control over ancestral properties and assets. This heading delves into the role of gender in property rights in the inheritance practice of the Ao society.

Gender in property inheritance remains a significant issue across many societies, particularly in patrilineal cultures such as the Ao society. Women often encounter systematic discrimination as a result of cultural norms and customary laws that favour male heirs, leading to marginalisation in property ownership and inheritance (Mishra, 2021). In many cases, women are excluded from inheriting ancestral property or are granted smaller shares than men (Kieran et al., 2017). These disparities exacerbate economic inequality, limit women's financial independence and impede their ability to make meaningful contributions to family and society. This gender-biased inheritance

practice stems from patriarchal values which reinforce male dominance in property ownership and decision-making (Agarwal, 1994).

The analysis under this heading focuses on the unequal distribution of resources based on gender, the disparities in property distribution, the persistent preference for male heirs, the role that patriarchy plays, and the consequences that arise as a result of not adhering to these norms.

This discussion begins by examining how individuals perceive gender equality in resource distribution, recognising that resources, property, and other assets are not always distributed equally based on gender. This analysis seeks to determine whether resources are distributed equally among men and women in Ao Naga society. By addressing this perspective, the aim is to highlight social attitudes towards equal resource distribution and inheritance.

Table 5.9 Equal resource distribution

Equal Resource Distribution	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency/ (%)
Yes	2	7	9 (4.5%)
No	91	85	176 (88%)
No Idea	7	8	15 (7.5%)
Total	100	100	200 (100%)

The analysis shows a stark reality regarding resource distribution within Ao society. An overwhelming majority of 176 respondents opined that resources are not distributed equally in Ao society, reinforcing the prevailing practice that affects access to land, wealth, and property ownership. The similarity of perceptions between developed (91 respondents) and underdeveloped villages (85 respondents) suggests that modern ideals of equality have no effect on resource distribution patterns, and traditional structures continue to dictate the distribution of ancestral properties.

The narratives from the respondents strongly affirm the lack of equitable resource distribution and reinforce the deeply entrenched patriarchal

framework governing inheritance and property control. Respondent 12 (underdeveloped village) bluntly states:

“Generally speaking, no, resources and properties are never distributed equally. There is always the gender difference. We women do not have any right, nor are we given any.”

This sentiment is echoed by Respondent 17 (underdeveloped village), who highlights the primacy of male lineage:

“Land belongs to the clan. There is no individual ownership nor any right for women. Only men have the right. So yes, the land-use practice does discriminate against women.”

Also, even within male inheritance structures, some respondents recognise disparities. Respondent 179 (underdeveloped village) states:

“Even among men, the eldest gets the first choice and the privilege, or some clans have more land while others have less. And in all of that, women do not have any rights at all.”

However, nine respondents (4.5%) opined that resources are distributed equally, with slightly more responses from underdeveloped villages (7) compared to developed ones (2). This suggests that, although rare, some individuals believe that the community engages in equitable practices. However, such cases remain minimal, making them exceptions rather than indicative of the broader societal practice and perception. Respondent 66 (developed village) illustrates how gendered disparities persist even when efforts are made toward equitable distribution:

“We bought land for our son and daughter, but it was not equal. While buying, one plot of land was bigger than the other. By default, the bigger land went to the son, as he was the male and the eldest as well.”

A small portion of 15 respondents (7.5%) expressed uncertainty about whether resources are distributed equally, reflecting a lack of direct knowledge of or engagement with the inheritance practices. These individuals accept the prevailing practice without questioning it and perceive resource distribution as an issue beyond their immediate control. Respondent 73 (developed village) exemplifies this perspective:

“After my father passed away, my mother and I can stay in the house until I get married and move with my husband and as long as my mother is alive. But besides that, the land and house belong to my brother. We have been given the privilege to stay, but we do not have any right over it.”

The data and respondent narratives reinforce a systemic imbalance in resource allocation and distribution, providing compelling evidence that resource distribution in Ao society remains deeply unequal, with women being excluded from inheritance and property ownership. Even in cases where families attempt fairness, the process often defaults to privileging male heirs, reinforcing the patriarchal nature of Ao society.

Building on this, the issue of male preference in inheritance is examined. Male preference in inheritance remains a deeply ingrained issue, rooted in cultural norms and traditional practices that prioritise sons over daughters in property distribution and inheritance. As Bhalotra et al. (2020) point out, son preference remains a manifestation of patriarchal norms, reinforcing gender inequality and limiting women’s access to property and resources. Respondents’ perspectives were therefore explored on whether there is male preference in inheritance, shedding light on how cultural norms perpetuate gender differences by favouring one gender over the other in property ownership within Ao Naga society.

A universal preference for male inheritance has been observed, with all 200 respondents (100%) from both developed and undeveloped villages agreeing on this practice. This consensus emphasises the deep-rooted patriarchal norms

governing property transmission in Ao Naga society. This constant preference across both village types also reflects the previous analyses of gender inequality in resource distribution and property allocation, reinforcing the predominant influence of patriarchal norms on the perception and practice of inheritance in Ao society.

The narratives of the respondents further highlight the reality that inheritance is not merely a matter of preference but a traditional practice that excludes women entirely. Respondent 14 (underdeveloped village) acknowledges that inheritance is predetermined for men, stating:

“It is not about giving preference since there is no choice or option for women from the beginning. Men always get the property from the beginning.”

This sentiment is echoed by Respondent 163 (underdeveloped village), who reflects on a common saying in Ao society:

“Till now, we say, ‘If we have only daughters, then there are no inheritors.’ Despite the many daughters one may have, if there is no son, then there is no one to inherit the father’s property. It is not about male preference for inheritance; rather, it is the fact that only men can inherit it.”

Such beliefs shape societal attitudes toward succession and influence parental expectations. For instance, Respondent 89 (underdeveloped village) notes that:

“People would not say it out loud often, but most of the time, every parent wants a son as their firstborn. Everything centres on that, especially regarding inheritance and lineage.”

Even disability does not alter the gendered nature of inheritance, as Respondent 63 (developed village) points out that:

“Even if a person is disabled, if he is a man, he has the privilege and the right to inherit the clan land. Women do not have that same privilege in terms of land.”

Moreover, inheritance aligns with broader gender expectations, with Respondent 27 (developed village) highlighting that:

“Men have been considered the breadwinners of the family; people generally prefer sons. Descent is traced through them. We say (senmanger aruko -a successor is born) when a son is born.”

Patriarchal inheritance is further justified through folklore and tradition handed down through generations. Respondent 78 (developed village) recounts a significant cultural narrative:

“There is a folklore that during the headhunting times, two sisters and their younger brother were attacked by an enemy. The sisters overcame the enemy and held him down. The elder sister called the younger brother and told him to cut off the enemy’s head. She could have done it herself, but she gave the honour of taking an enemy’s head to her little brother. That is why the saying goes, (tebur nem yimli ji agütsür - we give the privilege to men). Our practices have been influenced by such societal norms and beliefs, and the honour or rights are with men alone, whether in decision-making, ownership, or inheritance.”

Key Informant 4 further argued that:

“It is not about men and women, but our cultural practice from the earlier times, and it is not actually a privilege but a responsibility of carrying forward one’s identity by name and clan through the men. We gave that responsibility to men. The

responsibility of governing, the responsibility of carrying down the lineage, and we should respect that.”

Significantly, women themselves have internalised this structure, as reflected in Respondent 158’s (developed village) admission:

“I still remember being very happy when I knew that my firstborn was a male. Even as a woman and as a mother, I was very happy that it was a son. I shouldn’t feel like that, but our society is such that these emotions and feelings come naturally.”

Key Informant 8 emphasised that:

“From what I have observed, the way people talk and everything, parents feel secure when a male offspring is born. The lineage is secured, plus ego and pride play a big role. I am a father of 2/3 sons. The pride of being a father who has sons in our patriarchal society does arise.”

All these narratives and perspectives collectively paint a clear picture of the rigid and exclusionary inheritance system within Ao Naga society, where male inheritance is a deeply institutionalised practice reinforced by societal beliefs, cultural narratives, and historical relevance, with women themselves perpetuating and continuing the practice.

Having established the general inclination towards male preference in inheritance and the entrenched patriarchal customs governing property rights, it becomes clear that societal structures significantly contribute to the reinforcement of these inequalities. In addition to the cultural tradition of prioritising males, the ways by which society and men assert and impose their dominance over women further marginalise women in inheritance practices. The following analysis explores the perceptions of the respondents on whether societal dynamics and men superimpose their position on women in the assumed inheritance practices in Ao society.

Table 5.10 Men and Societal norms dominate women in inheritance

Men and Societal norms dominate women in inheritance	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency/ (%)
Yes	85	75	160 (80%)
No	10	9	19 (9.5%)
No Idea	5	16	21 (10.5%)
Total	100	100	200 (100%)

A significant majority of 160 respondents (80%) feel that societal norms and male dominance shape inheritance practices in Ao society, reinforcing patriarchal traditions that limit women's access to property. A closer examination shows that the women in developed villages (85 respondents) in contrast to underdeveloped villages (75 respondents) share this opinion more, suggesting that women in developed villages may be more aware of these inequalities. It somewhat reflects that women in developed villages are more conscious of how societal norms operate that act as barriers to their rights.

Respondent 68 (developed village) captures this reality:

“From our forefathers, Ao’s way of life has been dominated by men in our patriarchal society. Women could not do what men did. That is why we are not equal to men, and society treats us as such.”

Similarly, Respondent 79 (developed village) connects the historical traditional practices to modern inequalities:

“What we see and know is that both men and women are humans. But when it comes to status and honour, men have been allotted more privileges, which started from our headhunting times, where women were protected and men took the honour. That is why men are allotted bigger privileges.”

Moreover, since inheritance structures within Ao society are deeply tied to clan-based traditions, Respondent 43 (developed village) emphasised how clan affiliations reinforce male dominance:

“When we talk about property, it is either ancestral or clan property or communal property. Even when it comes to our title, we take our father’s clan title, and all the properties always stay with the men within the clan.”

This suggests that inheritance is not simply about land ownership but is also linked to cultural identity and lineage preservation, further reinforcing male dominance. Respondent 77 (developed village) further acknowledges the structured nature of patriarchy while hinting at how women’s roles were framed within it:

“Since ours is a patriarchal society, a woman’s privilege and status were not the same as men’s. From our forefathers, we have been practising this way.”

In contrast, a small group of 19 respondents (9.5%) asserted societal and male dominance over women is not a relevant factor in inheritance. Instead, they attributed the exclusion of women from inheritance to tradition and cultural norms. For instance, Respondent 80 (developed village) noted that:

“Inheritance has always followed the lineage of men. It is not about exclusion but about tradition. Our forefathers structured it this way, and we continue to follow it without questioning.”

Similarly, Respondent 105 (underdeveloped village) stated that:

“This is how our society has always functioned. Men inherit land, and women do not. It is not something to resist or challenge. It is simply the way things have been passed down through generations.” Implying a sense of inevitability and acceptance.

Respondent 118 (underdeveloped village) echoed this sentiment:

“For us, inheritance has never been an issue. Since descent and property follow male lines, there has been no need to discuss women inheriting land. It is not discrimination but an accepted practice.”

Respondent 196 (underdeveloped village) further emphasised that the exclusion of women from property inheritance is simply a part of their cultural values rather than a manifestation of male dominance, stating that:

“Women do not inherit property in our society, but this does not mean men are exerting dominance over us. It is simply our tradition, and we live by it as part of our cultural values.”

These views of these respondents suggest a strong adherence to traditional norms, with some even justifying the exclusion of women as an inherent aspect of their cultural context and accepting the practice without questioning. This behaviour and perception, as explained by Key Informant 11, is because:

“Women understand that clan land belongs to the clan. They do not fight for that right. Instead, the cultural practices give women the privilege to utilise it. We women accept and agree on the fact that we don’t have any right in clan land.”

Another notable number of 21 respondents (10.5%) expressed uncertainty about the issue of male dominance and societal norms dominating inheritance practice, with a higher proportion from underdeveloped villages (16 respondents) compared to only 5 respondents from developed villages expressing the same. Interestingly, these respondents were predominantly younger than the rest. Their uncertainty stemmed from a lack of involvement in matters relating to inheritance. Respondent 30 (developed village) admitted:

“I have never thought much about inheritance. It has always been handled by the elders in our family, and I have never been involved in those discussions.”

Similarly, Respondent 62 (developed village) stated:

“I do not know if men dominate inheritance or if it is just how things are structured. I have never questioned it, so I can’t say for sure.”

Respondent 120 (underdeveloped village) sharing the same perspective mentioned:

“Our inheritance practice has always followed a set tradition, but whether that means societal norms or men are dominating it unfairly, I am not sure. It has never been something I really thought about.”

Meanwhile, Respondent 113 (underdeveloped village) noted that:

“I have seen cases where families distribute property equally, but I have also seen cases where only men inherit. I suppose it depends on the household and the type of property.”

Respondent 161 (underdeveloped village) also acknowledged:

“Ah, no, I don’t have a clear idea of how inheritance works. I have never been directly affected, and in my family, land decisions are always left to my father.”

These perspectives also reflect how some respondents are unaware of the broader implications of the inheritance practices due to limited involvement in inheritance matters and ingrained acceptance of traditional norms without deeper reflection. This male preference in inheritance and societal position of men in society also influences the allocation of resources, resulting in a substantial gender assets gap in Ao society. Women have considerably less

access to land, wealth, and economic resources, leading to unequal ownership of property and resources between men and women.

This disparity reinforces economic dependency on male family members, limiting women's autonomy. As Respondent 1 (developed village) stated:

“Land is the foundation of wealth in our agricultural society. But it always stays with the men. Without land, we women have nothing to pass down or build upon but rather are always reliant on the male members.”

Other respondents further emphasised the significant gap in asset ownership. Respondent 61 (developed village) noted that:

“Besides some few women owning self-acquired property, everything is owned by men alone. There is a huge gap.”

Respondent 86 (underdeveloped village) also added:

“I have seen women work as hard as men, sometimes more in the field. But when it comes to ownership, everything is mostly in the name of the husbands or the fathers.”

Meanwhile, Respondent 8 (developed village) rationalised this gap, attributing it to:

“Since Ao society is patriarchal in nature, women don't have any rights to land and assets unless self-acquired (which rarely happens), so yes, there is a very big gap in gender asset ownership.”

The persistence of this gender assets gap is not just a result of discriminatory inheritance practices but also due to deep-rooted gender ideologies that shape societal perceptions of ownership, economic responsibilities, and property rights. As Agarwal (1994) argues, these ideologies reinforce traditional attitudes that prevent women from obtaining property rights, portraying men as

the primary providers and rightful inheritors of family assets. In Ao Naga society, as in many patrilineal cultures, these entrenched beliefs serve to justify and sustain discriminatory inheritance norms, unequal land rights, and restricted access to financial resources for women.

Despite legal frameworks promoting gender equality, cultural norms continue to limit women's ability to acquire, inherit, and control property. To better understand the influence of gender ideology on the gender assets gap, this analysis examines respondents' perspectives on how the gender norms influence the inheritance practices in Ao society.

Respondent 172 (underdeveloped village) noted:

“As a girl growing up, I understood that I shouldn't anticipate inheriting land or property. I realised that it is always with men who are recognised as the rightful inheritors. That is simply the way things are done here.”

Similarly, Respondent 11 (underdeveloped village) stated that:

“From the moment a child is born, it is clear: if it is a son, he will receive the inheritance. If it is a daughter, she will be married off. This has always been the way property has been structured.”

Respondent 194 (underdeveloped village), questioning the role of gender, noted:

“Why should a woman be left out just by virtue of her being a woman? However, when we look at the bigger picture, there are so many aspects attached to our gender and the practices that, in the end, we cannot deny them. Individually we might disagree with the practice and question it, but when faced with the general belief and practice, what can we do?”

These perspectives highlight how deeply ingrained gender ideologies and norms shape expectations and outcomes regarding property ownership. The influence of cultural norms based on their gender is also evident in respondents' understanding of the inheritance system. Respondent 55 (developed village) observed that:

“I noticed that women did not inherit or own land. When I asked why, I was told that land must remain with the male descendants of the clan. But that means we women must always rely on someone else. To cultivate land, we always have to depend on either our father’s or husband’s clan land.”

Respondent 136 (developed village), sharing her personal experience, added:

“When my father divided his property, my brother received everything, while I was left with nothing. It wasn’t because he didn’t love me, but rather because tradition dictates that daughters cannot inherit it. I had no option but to come to terms with it.”

These accounts demonstrate how gender ideology limits women’s access to assets and resources. On the other hand, Respondent 25 (developed village) mentioned:

“Honestly, I have never really thought about it. I just assumed this is how things are. Not because of our gender but because I always assumed it is our customary traditional practice.”

Similarly, Respondent 43 (developed village) added:

“I never thought about whether it is fair or not. It is just what everyone does.”

This shows that the cultural norms and traditional practices that perpetuate the gender assets gap are rooted deeply and generally recognised. The uniformity

in responses also highlights the pervasive influence of gender ideology on the assets gap, limiting women's access to assets and resources.

Property misuse and exploitation are also prevalent in societies where men have dominant control over assets. In many cases, male heirs often abuse their inheritance rights by mismanaging family property, excluding female relatives from inheritance, or selling ancestral land for personal benefit. Such practices not only aggravate financial disparities but also perpetuate women's marginalisation in property ownership and inheritance. To further analyse this issue, focus is laid on examining Ao women's perspective of men abusing their control over property, misusing their rights for personal gain, and reinforcing gender-based exclusion in inheritance practices.

Table 5.11 Patriarchal property abuse

Patriarchal Property Abuse	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency/ (%)
Yes	5	10	15 (7.5%)
No	83	71	154 (77%)
No Idea	12	19	31 (15.5%)
Total	100	100	200 (100%)

Only 15 respondents (7.5%), five from developed villages and ten from underdeveloped villages, opined that men abuse the property. The higher recognition in underdeveloped villages suggests that women in these areas perceive customary inheritance practices as exploitative, due to a stronger adherence to traditional customs and norms. Respondent 132 (underdeveloped village) stated:

“In our village, men alone control the property absolutely. While we don't always call it abuse, the reality is that it is their right alone.”

This quote encapsulates the perception of patriarchal property control, reflecting how exclusion is seen as normal rather than as an issue of fairness.

However, the overall low acknowledgement of abuse does not necessarily indicate an absence of abuse but rather a societal reluctance to recognise it as problematic, due to the acceptance of inheritance practices as customary, rather than abusive.

Meanwhile, a considerable majority of respondents, 154 individuals (77%), opined that they have not encountered patriarchal property abuse, with 83 from developed villages and 71 from underdeveloped villages sharing this perception. The widespread rejection of patriarchal property abuse reinforces the idea that traditional property inheritance and male-dominated land ownership are normalised rather than seen as exploitative. Within Ao society, clan land is collectively owned, meaning that individuals, including a man or individual, cannot do what he desires with the clan land even though he has the rights to it and that when one goes against the practice, sanctions are imposed by the community. Respondent 12 (underdeveloped village) affirms this communal system:

“There is no individual ownership of clan lands. One gets the right to use the land, but after one pass away, it goes to the next in line, and until and unless permission is obtained from the clan, one cannot do anything as he wishes with the land.”

Additionally, Respondent 110 (underdeveloped village) provides an example of how these limitations apply even within families:

“If my daughter asks for a share in her father’s clan land, her father cannot do so at his discretion. That is totally out of the question. He cannot give away even a small plot of land because it is not his alone but belongs to the entire clan. He does not have the right.”

Even though men may have land rights within this system, they are also bound by collective authority and face restrictions imposed by clan governance. Respondent 79 (developed village) highlights this:

“Men also come under the authority of the clan, so they also cannot do whatever they wish.”

Respondent 65 (developed village) further clarifies that property misuse is rare due to familial oversight:

“Men can hardly misuse property. They don’t really get that opportunity, as family and clan are involved.”

Moreover, 31 respondents (15.5%), 12 from developed villages and 19 from underdeveloped ones, expressed uncertainty, indicating that they have ‘No Idea’ or could not make up their mind, highlighting a lack of understanding or awareness regarding how patriarchal norms influence inheritance rights, its ownership and its usage. This group is significant because, particularly among women in underdeveloped villages, it draws attention to the lack of awareness and critical engagement with issues of gender dynamics in land tenure systems. The key point is that even though a limited number of respondents explicitly recognised the dominance of patriarchal norms, the existence of respondents who are either unaware or unsure suggests that patriarchal norms and customary practices go unchallenged in Ao society. Respondent 14 (developed village) mentioned:

“They don’t even have to misuse it because it is already theirs.”

However, although the opinions and perceptions on instances of property abuse tied to patriarchal structures are low, the data also indicates that it is prevalent and that concealed or unacknowledged forms of abuse may still be prevalent, masked by societal acceptance or ignorance of it. The tendency to view traditional inheritance structures as normal rather than exploitative prevents women from actively advocating for change, reinforcing systemic exclusion within property ownership.

Inheritance customs are profoundly rooted in cultural traditions and societal norms, which influence the distribution of property across generations. In Ao Naga society, customary laws and traditional beliefs play a significant part in

perpetuating male-dominated inheritance patterns, which typically favour sons over daughters. The collective acceptance of these norms makes it difficult for women to challenge their exclusion from ancestral property. This analysis examines respondents' perceptions of cultural justifications that sustain the prevailing inheritance practices in Ao Naga society.

A general consensus among all 200 respondents (100%) from both developed and underdeveloped villages affirmed that cultural factors play a crucial role in inheritance practice in Ao society. Not a single respondent of the study disagreed otherwise, nor did anyone show any uncertainty on the matter. This strong consensus clearly demonstrates the deep-rooted and unquestioned role of tradition and culture on property rights and its transmission within Ao Naga society.

The narrative of Respondent 198 (underdeveloped village) demonstrates the essence of how cultural norms dictate inheritance, stating:

“From our forefathers, the land in the village is inherited by men. What we have been told and taught is that if and when it is given to women, it becomes someone else’s land. This I agree with, and it is the practice we have.”

Similarly, Respondent 188 (underdeveloped village) also illustrates internalisation and acceptance of exclusion due to cultural norms:

“I, as a woman, question the practice since we do not have any rights. However, at the same time, I understand that since our beginning, it has been this way because of our cultural practice. Now, as a woman, I do not expect to receive any ancestral property, as I understand the system.”

Respondent 141 (developed village), acknowledging the rationale behind cultural influence in shaping inheritance norms, added:

“In our heritage the line goes non-stop and continuously on with the men. This doesn’t necessarily mean that women are considered inferior; rather, it has more to do with passed-down traditions and acquired mindsets.”

This unanimous broad response highlights the rigidity of patriarchal norms and traditional practices, which are firmly established and remain unchallenged in Ao society, influencing not only the distribution of land and property but also shaping women’s perceptions of what is practical or socially acceptable in terms of inheritance rights. Irrespective of village types, cultural norms dictate inheritance exclusively through male lineage, and this custom is rarely questioned or contested within the Ao community.

While cultural traditions serve as the foundation of inheritance practice in Ao society, they are not upheld by belief alone. These customary practices are actively maintained through social mechanisms that enforce conformity and adherence with the community, often reinforced through societal repercussions imposed on those who deviate from established norms. The following section explores the negative sanctions faced by individuals, particularly women, when one goes against the set norms or practices. By examining these views, the analysis tries to provide insights into the broader challenges and the implications for achieving gender equality in property rights within Ao society.

Table 5.12 Negative sanctions for non-conformity to norms

Negative Sanctions for non-conformity to norms	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency/ (%)
Yes	94	86	180 (90%)
No	Nil	Nil	Nil
No Idea	6	14	20 (10%)
Total	100	100	200 (100%)

From the views obtained, a notable 180 respondents (90%) affirmed that deviating from societal norms results in negative repercussions or sanctions. This perspective is shared across both developed (94) and underdeveloped (86)

villages, reinforcing the strong cultural emphasis on adherence to traditional practices. The widespread consensus also highlights the acceptance and conformation to norms even though it is discriminatory in nature and deeply rooted within the fabric of the Ao society. The rigidity of social norms and the community's strong disapproval for deviation, particularly in contexts related to gender roles, inheritance practices, and the advocacy of rights, which does not adhere to the accepted customary practices of the society, results in sanctions being imposed.

Respondent 156 (developed village) reinforces this pressure:

“Never heard of any women going against the norm. They would be labelled as greedy and as if they were going against men. Specifically, as widows, if we demand something that is not in the norm, we will be highly criticised. We are often told: ‘Milar-i Milar ama liang’ - a widow should know her place.”

Respondent 32 (developed village) added:

“In our patriarchal society, the set roles and norms of both genders are very clear. One is expected to stay within that norm. If a woman goes against it, heavy criticism will follow, and if she keeps pushing, social repercussions and alienation will be the end result.”

Respondent 87 (underdeveloped village) also added:

“Not only against women; sanctions and consequences are equally imposed if a man goes against the norms too. Society would always question and punish.”

Although the majority of respondents acknowledge the social retractions, 20 respondents (10%), six from developed villages and 14 from underdeveloped villages, voiced uncertainty, indicating a lack of awareness, limited exposure to

instances of violation of norms, or a passive internalisation of norms where questioning them is neither culturally encouraged nor considered.

Respondent 48 (developed village) stated:

“It is not like women are totally ignored. Women are taken care of and looked after when the need arises. Plus, we women also do not really think about going against the norm and asking for a right which we know cannot be ours or taken forcefully. We women are not the successors of it and we don’t really give much thought to it.”

Respondent 155 (underdeveloped village) added:

“Women having the right to inherit properties is something unfamiliar to us. And forget about the consequences. We do not even consider going against the said norms. I follow the practice because my mother followed it. She followed because her mother followed it. The rest I do not know.”

Respondent 155 (underdeveloped village) concluded:

“The practice has been handed down through generations, and to bring a change in that or raise questions against that does not arise often. So, women having the right to inherit properties is something unfamiliar to us.”

The views and perspectives obtained indicate that AOs and women in general face societal repercussions for deviating from traditional practices or norms, irrespective of regional differences. The overwhelming perception of disciplinary consequences for opposing societal norms, particularly concerning gender and property rights, illustrates how adherence to cultural expectations is maintained through the fear of social exclusion or retaliation, discouraging women from seeking equality or asserting their rights.

The analysis highlights the deep-rooted gender disparities in inheritance practices within Ao society, where patriarchal norms impede women's ability to own and control property. A substantial majority acknowledged the gender bias in the land tenure system, which is perpetuated by gender norms that limit women's autonomy and maintain inequality. While a minority opines that the inheritance practice and the gender ideologies as natural and accepted norms, the majority perceives them as discriminatory.

Expanding on this gendered analysis of inheritance practice, it is important to examine the conflicts that emerge from unequal distribution and transmission of property rights. Disputes over inheritance often highlight deeper issues related to gender inequality and patriarchal customs, which intensify the difficulties encountered by women who seek their fair share of property. The following heading examines the dynamics involved in property-related conflicts within Ao Naga society.

5.5 Conflict over Property Rights

Inheritance and property rights provide women with more opportunities and empowerment (Datta, 2006). However, within the existing societal norms that assign different rights to men and women, a woman striving for her rightful share faces significant resistance (Bhatla et al., 2006). Property disputes, often exacerbated by gendered norms, cause tension in families and communities. In many communities, such as the Ao Nagas, unequal property rights can lead to disputes over land ownership, control, and distribution. Women who assert their rights often encounter opposition from male relatives, while societal norms that prohibit or discourage female land ownership further intensify these disputes. This heading under eight sub-headings explores the types and nature of property-related conflicts, the family dynamics and challenges associated with them, the broader implications for women's rights, and the outcomes of inheritance disputes in Ao Naga society.

Conflicts over inheritance frequently involve a number of stakeholders, including immediate family members, extended relatives, and, in certain

extreme cases, village councils or customary institutions. Disputes arise as a result of competing claims, legal ambiguities, and cultural prejudices that favour male heirs. Assessing whether the sampled respondents have experienced property-related conflicts provides insights into the prevalence and nature of such disputes.

Table 5.13 Land dispute involvement

Land Dispute Involvement	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency/ (%)
Yes	1	Nil	1 (0.5%)
No	99	100	199 (99.5%)
No Idea	Nil	Nil	Nil
Total	100	100	200 (100%)

Involvement in land disputes was exceedingly uncommon among the sampled respondents of the study, as only one (0.5) out of 200 respondents indicated that they have experienced such an issue and interestingly the cases was from a developed village, which have been further illustrated in the case study section. Furthermore, there were no reports of such involvement in land disputes from those in underdeveloped villages, and there was also no indication of uncertainty or lack of awareness.

This significant lack of reported land disputes (99.5%) can be attributed to women's restricted rights and adherence to traditional practices, which minimise opportunities for land-related conflicts due to strict customary land regulations and collective ownership practices.

Another important dimension of inheritance disputes involves conflicts between siblings, particularly between brothers and sisters. In societies where male heirs are prioritised, tensions over property division can lead to resentment and disputes. Sisters may struggle to accept the inheritance practice, particularly when cultural norms strongly favour their brothers, which can result in disputes. These disputes not only reflect gendered biases but also

highlight the broader societal expectations regarding property ownership and family lineage.

The following analysis examines whether Ao women believe that disputes occur among siblings in Ao society, reflecting their perceptions of familial property conflicts and broader gendered disparities in inheritance practices.

Table 5.14 Siblings inheritance disputes

Siblings Inheritance Disputes	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency/ (%)
Yes	13	7	20 (10%)
No	83	87	170 (85%)
No Idea	4	6	10 (5%)
Total	100	100	200 (100%)

Among the 200 respondents, just 20 women (10%), 13 from developed and seven from underdeveloped villages, opined that disputes do occur over inheritance among siblings. This rather low percentage implies that, although some women recognise intrafamily disputes surrounding inheritance, these issues are not particularly prevalent in a cultural setting where inheritance customs are deeply ingrained and largely unquestioned, and when disputes do occur, it would mostly be with regard to unequal or unfair distribution of acquired properties of the parents. Respondent 64 (developed village) stated that disputes occur when expectations differ:

“There are times when we hear of disagreements among siblings, especially when it comes to properties bought by parents. Everyone thinks they deserve an equal share on it. But when it comes to ancestral clan properties, such conflicts would rarely happen. We have a custom to follow, and people, especially siblings and family members, usually don’t misuse their claim on it.”

Respondent 118 (underdeveloped village) also added:

“I have seen my cousins argue over who gets what from their father’s private land. The ancestral land is not debated, but things parents bought in urban areas with lots of potential become sensitive.”

A significant majority of 170 respondents (85%), 83 from developed villages and 87 from underdeveloped villages, felt that such conflicts do not occur, indicating that traditional inheritance customs, which prioritise male succession, are widely accepted. The fact that respondents from both village types share similar perspectives shows that whether in developed or underdeveloped villages, patriarchal inheritance customs remain dominant and largely uncontested.

Respondent 195 (underdeveloped village) reflects the normalised and uncontested nature of male succession, stating:

“There is nothing to argue about. Everyone knows the practices and the customs are very clear. It has always been that way, and it will go on.”

Respondent 25 (developed village) added:

“I would never argue with my brothers when it comes to matters related to land. Even if it is about what I acquired, what will I do with it? In fact, I feel it is a burden instead.”

In the meantime, 10 respondents (5%) expressed that they were unsure whether such disputes do occur or not, highlighting the ongoing lack of female participation in discussions and decisions regarding inheritance. This lack of uncertainty also emphasises the passive acceptance of traditional inheritance norms, as well as the fact that respondents have simply never personally experienced disputes, leading to a lack of awareness regarding such conflicts within their community.

Respondent 41 (developed village) reinforced the limited awareness or involvement due to structural exclusion mentioned:

“I don’t really know if such disputes happen. Maybe because we women are not a part of those talks. I myself have never been involved in such discussions.”

The opinions of the respondents indicate that sibling inheritance disputes are relatively rare primarily due to the patriarchal nature of the inheritance practice, and while conflicts do occur, they remain the exception rather than the norm. However, influences that come as a result of modernity gradually increased property disputes, particularly regarding acquired assets rather than ancestral clan land.

Property disputes frequently lead to deep divisions within families, causing estrangement, instability, and financial hardship. Inheritance conflicts, particularly over land and assets, result in tension among siblings, prolonged legal battles, and financial hardships, especially for those who are denied their rightful share. The lack of access to property can also worsen economic insecurity, limiting opportunities for individuals, particularly women, to achieve financial independence. To gain deeper insight into the social and economic consequences of property-related issues on family relationships, the following analysis explores whether the sampled respondents have experienced any problems in their family due to a lack of property or inheritance rights.

Table 5.15 Problems in family due to Lack of property

Problems in family due to lack of property	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency/ (%)
Yes	7	9	16 (8%)
No	93	91	184 (92%)
No Idea	Nil	Nil	Nil
Total	100	100	200 (100%)

Out of the 200 respondents, only 16 women (8%), nine from underdeveloped villages and seven from developed villages, reported experiencing problems in

the family due to the lack of property. The respondents indicated that the problems they experience due to a lack of property predominantly manifest as a lack of respect within the family. As Respondent 100 (underdeveloped village) mentioned:

“Sometimes I feel left out in family discussions, especially when it comes to land or major decisions. Since we women don’t have any say in matters related to land, our words often do not amount to anything.”

Similarly, Respondent 6, (developed village) describes how decisions were made entirely by male relatives after her father’s passing:

“After my father passed away, since we were only daughters, our uncles and the male relatives of my father’s side automatically started discussing and made decisions on the matters related to our land. We were expected to accept whatever they decided even though it actually belonged to our family.”

Beyond social exclusion, economic dependency due to lack of property ownership was another concern raised by respondents. Respondent 169 (underdeveloped village) reflects on how land ownership could have changed her circumstances:

“I am very dependent on my husband for everything since I am unemployed. Everything depends on his income, and because of that there is not much autonomy for me. If I had some kind of property of my own, I believe my life and circumstances would be very different from the one I have now.”

Despite these accounts, the data indicates that such problems are not commonly reported. This tendency to avoid such discussions can be seen from the majority of 184 respondents (92%), who reported that they do not face any such issues within their families, with similar feedback from respondents of

both developed (93) and underdeveloped (91) villages. This majority implies that while property ownership holds importance in larger economic and social contexts, it is not viewed as a vital element affecting family relationships.

Respondent 59 (developed village) underscores this viewpoint:

“This is how things have always been for us. Men inherit and own the land, and women are taken care of by men. I don’t think it causes any problems in the family. Economic problems, lack of respect or security whatever it may be, it cannot be solved just by owning a piece of land.”

Respondent 75 (developed village) added:

“Economic hardships or lack of land are considered normal, and women have accepted the inheritance norms and are therefore not directly linked to family conflicts as per the respondents.

Similarly, Respondent 127 (underdeveloped village) expresses contentment with the existing system:

“I have never felt any tension at home because I don’t own land. My husband takes care of everything, and I’ve accepted that.”

Further reinforcing the perceived stability of customary inheritance, Respondent 183 (underdeveloped village) notes:

“Property does not define respect in our family. We all understand and follow the customary practices, so there’s no reason to argue.”

Interestingly, none of the respondents were uncertain regarding the issue discussed during the interviews. This awareness implies that despite existing limitations on land ownership, women in Ao society recognise and acknowledge the traditions as part of the societal structure rather than actively

challenging it. Although lack of property may not directly cause family disputes or problems, its broader economic and social consequences, such as dependency and restricted decision-making abilities, remain significant considerations.

Women's exclusion from property ownership not only limits their social and economic opportunities, but it also has profound consequences for their rights and personal security. When women question and challenge discriminatory inheritance practices, they often face backlash from family members and the society, which reinforces established gender discrimination against women. These struggles for rightful property claims can result in increased tensions, social stigma, and even acts of violence intended to discourage women from asserting their rights. This sub-heading examines whether conflicts over property contributes to an increase in physical and psychological violence when women fight for their rights in Ao society.

Table 5.16 Escalation of violence when women demand equal rights

Escalation of violence when women demand equal rights	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency/ (%)
Yes	73	57	130 (65%)
No	9	5	14 (7%)
No Idea	18	38	56 (28%)
Total	100	100	200 (100%)

Among the respondents, 130 women (65%) feel that violence escalates when women challenge societal norms. This perspective, observed across both developed villages (73 respondents) and underdeveloped villages (57 respondents), indicates that patriarchal dominance is deeply rooted across various socio-economic backgrounds and that confronting these systems frequently encounters strict resistance. Respondents reinforce this fear with examples of past resistance to gender reforms:

Respondent 180 (underdeveloped village) stated:

“When the issue of 33% reservation came up, look at how the situation was back then and how the menfolk and society reacted. Now imagine the condition if we women fight for the right to land.”

Similarly, Respondent 200 (underdeveloped village) reflects on the extreme social tensions caused by that movement, adding:

“During the 33% seat reservation, the issue became so grave that a fellow Naga died. It was just for the reservation of seats for women in local bodies. Now imagine the situation if women stood for the right to inherit land, which has been with men all this time.”

This strong opposition to women challenging male-dominated inheritance practices reinforces the idea that land and property ownership are viewed as exclusively male domains. Respondent 61 (developed village) explains that any attempt to challenge this structure would not be taken well:

“In a male-dominated society, if we women stand for a right that enters into their domain, then I don’t think it would be taken well by them. Of course, physical violence might not start at the beginning, but if we persist with our fight, then I am sure it will lead to it eventually.”

Similarly, Respondent 37 (developed village) explains the societal reaction:

“Living in a patriarchal society, women are expected to be under men. But when she goes against these norms, she would be segregated or, if not, shut down in shame. Her voice becomes rather unheard, and she will be seen as opinionated or someone going against society.”

Meanwhile, only 14 respondents (7%), nine from developed villages and five from underdeveloped villages, opined that such demands do not result in

violence but are discarded without recognising or accepting such demands. However, this small minority contrasts sharply with the majority view, indicating that instances of peaceful acceptance are rare and that consequences often follow with it. Respondent 27 (developed village) holds a more optimistic view, stating:

“I don’t think women should face any consequences for fighting for their rights as long as it does not involve demand for ancestral property.”

Respondent 26 (developed village) also acknowledges that women may gain acceptance in cases of self-acquired property but face strong backlash when demanding ancestral inheritance rights:

“In terms of self-acquired properties, I think socially it’s kind of accepted and practised. But if we demand inherited rights or ancestral properties, then a woman would face lots of criticism from her own family and society in general.”

However, a total of 56 respondents (28%) indicated that they are not aware or were unsure about the topic. This considerable percentage, particularly in underdeveloped regions (38 out of 100), indicates a lack of direct engagement in activism or questioning the existing norms due to social stigma or the normalisation of such actions. Respondent 189 (underdeveloped village) reflects this:

“I have never really thought about such things. It’s just not something we consider in our society because we have hardly or never seen anyone question it openly.”

Similarly, Respondent 193 (underdeveloped village) acknowledges a general lack of discourse around the issue:

“Honestly, I don’t know. No one around me has ever raised such an issue, so I don’t know what might happen. Maybe nothing, but probably it would create lots of issues, as it is not in our practice.”

Also, Respondent 7 (developed village) noted:

“It is not that I don’t care, but this has been the norm for so long that I never thought about going against it, or what would happen if someone did, and women usually don’t talk about it because it’s considered disrespectful to the elders and the community to even raise such questions.”

Overall, the data indicates that most Ao women view a direct threat of violence when they advocate or stand for equal rights, highlighting the hostile social environment that leaves no space to go against the customary practices. This perception of women also acts as a major obstacle, discouraging women from publicly asserting their rights in ancestral property inheritance and decision-making, despite increasing awareness and advocacy activities.

The struggle for property rights also disrupts traditional family dynamics, intensifying tensions within households. When women seek equal inheritance rights, their claims are perceived as a challenge to established patriarchal norms, creating friction with husbands, in-laws, and extended families. In many cases, family members oppose and resist such assertions, fearing that granting women property rights could undermine male authority or disrupt inheritance practices. This resistance gives rise to verbal disputes, strained relationships, or even social exclusion. Continuing the previous analysis of violence associated with women advocating for their rights, this analysis examines the impact of their pursuit of property rights on domestic relationships and household stability in Ao Naga society.

Table 5.17 Women's fight for equality leads to family tensions

Women's fight for equality leads to family tensions	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency/ (%)
Yes	87	80	167 (83.5%)
No	6	6	12 (6%)
No Idea	7	14	21 (10.5%)
Total	100	100	200 (100%)

A significant majority of 167 women (83.5%) believed that advocating for equality among women tends to escalate family conflicts. This perception is prevalent in both developed (87) and underdeveloped (80) villages, indicating that traditional gender roles within family dynamics continue to be firmly rooted across various social contexts. The findings reveal that when women assert their rights, it is frequently viewed as a challenge to established patriarchal authority, thus becoming a source of tension within the household.

Respondent 149 (developed village) explains the expected backlash if women demand property rights, stating:

“Instead of my brother getting the properties alone after my father's death, if I also demanded a share in the clan land, I would have faced severe consequences. It wouldn't have even been considered as a possibility, and I would not even consider demanding, as I know I have no rights to do so.”

Respondent 2 (developed village) underlines the wider family and clan-level tensions, noting:

“Women going against or fighting for equality in property rights within a patriarchal society would highly lead to unrest within the family and the clan.”

The respondents also mentioned that while physical violence is not always the immediate response, women face significant psychological distress.

Respondent 6 (developed village) expresses the emotional burden placed on women who challenge male-dominated property rights:

“Our society is patriarchal in nature, and if a woman goes against that, fighting for something men think is their sole right, then definitely there would be an issue. Physically, she might not be abused much, but psychologically, she would endure a lot.”

On the other hand, a mere 12 respondents (6%) opposed this, and the viewpoint was consistently represented across both developed and underdeveloped villages, reflecting growing acceptance among certain households that women should have property rights. Respondent 3 (developed village) acknowledges the gradual change, stating:

“Before, it would have been the case. But nowadays, I see changes. People are more tolerant and openly discussing the issue.”

In the meantime, 21 respondents (10.5%) expressed uncertainty, with a larger percentage coming from underdeveloped villages (14 respondents). This indicates a sense of acknowledgement where inequality is accepted to the point that its effects are seldom questioned or openly addressed.

Respondent 10 (developed village) explains that:

“I know men are the ones who inherit, but I have never really thought about whether that is fair or not. It is just how things are. We just accept it because it is how we were raised.”

Similarly, Respondent 16 (underdeveloped village) added:

“We have lived with these customs for so long that it doesn’t even feel like something that should be questioned.”

These narratives illustrate that advocating for equal rights in property inheritance results in considerable family conflicts, reinforcing gender-based

restrictions on land ownership. Although some respondents note signs of progress and acceptance, the majority express concerns about serious consequences, both emotional and societal, if women push for their inheritance rights.

Property disputes have far-reaching consequences not only for the individuals directly involved but also for their families and the community at large. Conflicts over inheritance can result in financial burden and even social exclusion, particularly for women who challenge traditional norms. These disputes often exacerbate intergenerational tensions, as younger generations inherit the same gendered inequalities that fuel property disputes. Furthermore, unresolved disputes aggravate economic instability and reinforce discrimination, making it even more difficult for women to secure what is rightfully theirs. Delving deeper into the various outcomes that arise from inheritance disputes, we further highlight the respondent's views on the increased dispute over property within the family and their impact on the individuals, their family relationships, economic security, and social structures.

The responses from the respondents highlight severe consequences women face when they challenge traditional inheritance practices and conflicts arise in the family, leading to social exclusion, emotional turmoil, and in some cases, violence and societal backlash. Although a few respondents recognize a rising consciousness and slow changes, the vast majority suggest that women's inheritance rights continue to be a contested issue, often resulting in significant rifts within families and communities.

As per the respondents, one significant outcome of increased inheritance conflicts would be the social and familial disownment that women may face when they stand for equal property rights. Many respondents specifically mentioned that challenging traditional male inheritance norms would lead to exclusion from their families and clans, which reinforces the deep-rooted cultural belief in collective ownership of land by the male lineage.

Respondent 13 (developed village) expressed the fear of being disowned by her family and clan, illustrating how women who demand property rights risk complete alienation.

“If I ever asked for a share in the property, I might be disowned not just by my family but also by the clan if I keep on persisting. It is like crossing an invisible line, which, once we cross, would bear harsh consequences.”

Respondent 150 (developed village) also notes that those who challenge the customary inheritance may face questioning by clan authorities.

“If a woman dares to challenge the customary inheritance system, she would definitely be questioned by the clan elders. They would call her to explain herself, as if asking for her rights is a crime against tradition.”

This social isolation serves as a means of enforcement, deterring women from making property claims, as losing ties to family and community can be a costly price. The fear of being alienated perpetuates silence and compliance, thereby ensuring that customary laws continue to prevail, despite external legal reforms.

Beyond physical consequences, respondents also opined that increased inheritance disputes create considerable psychological and emotional strain on women who attempt to challenge patriarchal property norms. Multiple respondents expressed that women would face emotions of loss, isolation, and declining mental health when confronted with family inheritance conflicts. Respondent 66 (developed village) highlights:

“Even if there’s no physical harm, the emotional burden is heavy. A woman who persistently asks for her share would definitely face lots of pressure. The stigma she faces would slowly eat away at her peace of mind.”

This highlights a type of coercive control, where women are discouraged from asserting their inheritance rights not only through physical pressure but also through emotional and psychological exhaustion. Many internalise deep-seated guilt or conflict when they try to claim their rights, often resulting in their withdrawal from advocacy in order to protect their mental well-being.

The respondents also believed that inheritance conflicts can result in the fragmentation of family bonds, causing lasting consequences such as estrangement, broken communication, and long-lasting tensions. Families can turn into battlegrounds, as traditional property norms often compel women to make a difficult choice between familial ties and financial stability.

Respondent 2 (developed village) shares that:

“If a woman starts claiming her share in the ancestral land, it won’t just upset the family; it will stir the entire clan. Such actions are seen as a direct challenge to the traditions that have always favoured men.”

While Respondent 33 (developed village) acknowledges that:

“Women have never been given land in our tradition. And when one dares to ask, the backlash is heavy. She would face silence, blame, and isolation from her own family.”

This cultural practice puts emphasis on harmony instead of justice, where maintaining family and societal cohesion frequently undermines women’s rights to inherit. Moreover, for some respondents, women claiming inheritance rights is not merely a legal matter; it is viewed as a direct challenge to family honour and clan reputation. Women advocating for property rights are often perceived as bringing disgrace and dishonour to the family and undermining traditional values that emphasise male lineage in the succession of property.

Respondent 17 (underdeveloped village) explains the social stigma attached to female inheritance claims.

“When a woman goes against the norms and speaks up for her rights, society does not just disagree; they shame her, isolate her, and label her as someone who has disrespected her roots. Her voice is often silenced before it’s even heard.”

The preservation of family honour reinforces patriarchal systems, and even legal intervention or reforms are viewed as threats to cultural identity rather than progressive change. Beyond the individual families, the respondents also believed that inheritance disputes often escalate to clan-level intervention, where traditional clan (kidong) authorities or customary institutions enforce cultural property laws. Respondent 120 (underdeveloped village) explains this:

“Inheritance disputes are not just about land. It concerns control, lineage, identity and power. When a woman claims such rights, it threatens the entire system that has been built to keep those things in the hands of men.”

Similarly, Respondent 172 (underdeveloped village) highlights that claiming property rights leads to unrest beyond the family:

“When a woman demands property, it does not just concern her family. It unsettles the whole clan. Our Ao inheritance system is not made to handle women challenging it or owning clan land, so any such move creates widespread unrest.”

All this reinforces the fact that inheritance disputes involve complex emotional, social, and cultural beliefs, with women challenging male-dominated property norms facing severe consequences, highlighting the deep entanglement of property, power, identity, and local governance, making legal reforms difficult to implement without engagement with traditional institutions, which are also safeguarded and protected under Article 371 A of the Indian Constitution. Despite the legal frameworks which stand and promote gender equality, customary laws and practices continue to dictate the inheritance practices in Ao and Naga society in general.

Moreover, property disputes are rare mainly due to adherence to traditional practices, and when women question the laid norms, backlash is often faced, ranging from conflicts arising within the family, risks of getting cast out from the clan and the community, psychological distress and threats of violence with the persistence in demand for the rights to ancestral property. This fear of consequences often keeps women from asserting their rights, but at the same time women themselves accept the inheritance practice as the accepted norm thereby cases of conflict rarely arise, maintaining the norm as well as the secondary position of women in Ao society.

5.6 Decision-making and Empowerment

Property ownership has tremendous effects on women's autonomy and influence in both household and societal contexts (Gupta, 2022). The ability to make independent decisions about land and property enhances women's economic stability and standing in society. Yet, in many societies, including the Ao Naga community, women's authority over property and decisions related to it remains restricted by cultural and traditional norms. This section explores the relationship between land ownership and women's empowerment through three key dimensions: decision-making roles, empowerment within the family, and the impact of property ownership on daily life. Each dimension draws upon the lived experiences and perceptions of Ao Naga women to highlight how property ownership or the lack thereof shapes their lives in the society.

Ideally, property ownership provides individuals the right to make decisions about the use, sale, or management of their property. Existing studies on women inheriting properties or having rights to access and own properties demonstrate that these rights empower women, allowing them to have more control over decisions that affect their lives (Malhotra & Schuler, 2005; Aslam & Kingdon, 2012; Doss, 2013). However, traditional norms and family structures often undermine these rights, limiting women's decision-making autonomy.

The ability to make independent decisions about property is a fundamental element of empowerment. However, in the Ao Naga context, women often lack full autonomy over the land they own or utilise. To assess these dynamics, this analysis examines whether Ao women have the autonomy to make key decisions regarding their property and the extent to which their voices are considered in matters related to land.

Table 5.18 Decisions over land owned

Decisions over land owned	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency/ (%)
Yes	6	Nil	6 (3%)
Jointly with husband	7	2	9 (4.5%)
No	87	98	185 (92.5%)
Total	100	100	200 (100%)

Only six respondents (3%), all from developed villages, reported having independent authority over the acquired properties they own, demonstrating instances of personal financial autonomy and capability leading to legal ownership legal and control over property. These women, through self-acquired or gifted properties, have full decision-making power, allowing them to sell, rent, or manage their land without external interference. Respondent 5 (developed village) shared:

“The land I own was bought with my own income, and it is registered in my name. I have the autonomy to make decisions about it. I can sell it, rent it out or give it to anyone I wish to.”

Similarly, Respondent 171 (underdeveloped village) noted:

“Having my name on the documents of the land gives me a sense of security. I worked hard for it, and I can use it the way I deem best and necessary.”

Respondent 174 (underdeveloped village) stated:

“I may not have inherited land, but what I bought through my hard work is fully under my control. It is something that no one could take away, and it feels empowering.”

Respondent 81 (developed village) highlights her experience:

“It is rare for women in our society to own land, but since I was gifted land acquired by my father, I do have the right to make decisions on that. But in terms of husband’s clan land, I don’t interfere.”

Beyond independent ownership, nine respondents (4.5%), seven from developed villages and two from underdeveloped villages, indicated that they share the decision-making powers with their husband on the properties they jointly acquired. These women, while not sole owners, actively participate in discussions and decisions regarding property management.

Respondent 4 (developed village) stated:

“My husband and I bought the land together, so we both make decisions about it. We discuss things before deciding on anything.”

Respondent 6 (developed village) affirmed:

“The property is under both our names, so it is only fair that we decide together. It is a matter of mutual understanding.”

Meanwhile, Respondent 101 (developed village) remarked:

“Though the land is legally in his name, we treat it as something we built together, and he values my opinion on how it should be used.”

However, despite these instances of independent or shared ownership, the considerable majority of 185 respondents (92.5%) reported having no control over landed property since they do not own any property. This includes 87 respondents from developed villages and an even higher 98 respondents from underdeveloped villages. This overwhelming figure highlights the deep-rooted patriarchal system of land ownership in Ao society, where women are excluded from possessing land and, as a result, from participating in decision-making. Respondent 11 (underdeveloped village) exemplifies this exclusion:

“We women do not make any decision regarding land property matters. It all depends on the clan and our husbands. We do not have any right or say in such matters, be it political, social or landed property.”

This absence of control extends beyond property and influences women’s civic and political lives. Respondent 166 (underdeveloped village) explains:

“Owning land would make us a stakeholder. Our voices would be heard too. But till now we are not a stakeholder, so we have no decision-making ability or involvement. Not only that, since we do not own land and is not stakeholders, we do not attend the Senso Mungdang (Village General Conference) and, as such, are considered secondary citizens and is voiceless.”

Women’s exclusion is not limited to formal authority or division-making alone. It also applies to practical aspects such as farming. Respondent 178 (underdeveloped village) shared:

“As a society where rights to land are only with men, we women are not only involved in the decision-making power related to land, but even to cultivate land, we have to ask permission from men to farm on their land.”

Even in cases where women have familial ties to the land, such as widows or daughters, they remain secondary to male authority. Respondent 190 (underdeveloped village) explained:

“After my husband passed away, our son took control over the lands. He does ask me about the boundaries, but all matters related to land belong to the clans and the men.”

Similarly, Respondent 149 (developed village) described:

“Before our father passed away, decisions regarding land were made by him. After him, my elder brother takes care of it with advice from our uncles and clan.”

The marginalisation is also rationalised through gender stereotypes. Respondent 30 (developed village) stated:

“My father and brother are there. I don’t have those responsibilities. And in general, our society say - women think emotionally in every aspect, so I don’t think we are given that responsibility. We women are just considered as homemakers and not involved in any such kind of decision-making process.”

The long-standing traditions that keep women from participating in property-related decisions have become deeply internalised. Respondent 62 (developed village) explained:

“It is hard to break away from such norms because it has been taught that way. We are socialised to believe that women cannot interfere. Men consider us women as ‘tetsür tanur’ (girl-child) and deem us unfit for decision-making.”

Respondent 109 (underdeveloped village) reinforced this cultural conditioning:

“It is a man’s world. Matters related to Yimli (governance, decision-making) have always been done by men, and we women always submit to men in our society.”

Besides that, many women are explicitly told they have no place in such matters. Respondent 58 (developed village) revealed:

“When one is not a stakeholder, how can they interfere? Men say - You would not get it so why would you get involved in the decision-making?’ Such decision-making matters are for men alone. We can share our opinion, but it is often disregarded, as we women do not have any say on such matters.”

This internalised exclusion is further supported and passed down through cultural socialisation. As Respondent 97 (underdeveloped village) pointed out:

“Aningnoza anüti anoza yu cheba ngapi? -(Girl child. Who would listen to what a girl would say?) From our forefathers’ time, it has been set up that way. How can we interfere?”

Finally, Respondent 151 (developed village) concisely summarised the widespread patriarchal view:

“Men have always had the upper hand in all big decisions since our forefathers. Women are confined to household matters rather than intellectual decision-making.”

Moreover, among the 182 respondents, one respondent from a developed village and two respondents from underdeveloped villages stated that they technically own property but only have usufructuary rights. They were granted ancestral land solely for their sustenance, without actual control over it. Respondent 63 (developed village) explained her situation:

“As long as I am alive, I am permitted to live on my father’s land but would not have any decision-making rights over it such as giving it away or selling or such.”

This analysis reflects the prevailing customary practice in Ao Naga society, where women are largely excluded in ancestral property rights and decision-making, as such matters rest in the hands of the male members of the clan, perpetuating the marginalisation of women and reinforcing the patriarchal framework over land ownership and control. Moreover, among the respondents who were involved in property-related decisions, their involvement primarily centred around selling, purchasing, and mortgaging of land. While these actions are somewhat limited, they illustrate the specific circumstances in which women assert decision-making authority, frequently restricted by patriarchal structures that favour male dominance in property management.

Household decision-making authority is another critical dimension of empowerment. Research suggests that economic empowerment, such as owning land, can translate into greater decision-making authority at home (Agarwal, 1994; Deere & Doss, 2006). Building on this premise, a crucial question raised by Basnet (2012) was examined: Do women who own land participate more in household decision-making compared to those without land ownership? This inquiry is explored through the perspectives and experiences of Ao women, offering an understanding of the relationship between land ownership and more decision-making authority within their household.

Table 5.19 Decision-making in household due to land ownership

Decision-making in household due to land ownership	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency/ (%)
Yes	28	24	52 (26%)
No	41	39	80 (40%)
No Idea	31	37	68 (34%)
Total	100	100	200 (100%)

A significant number of 52 respondents (26%), 28 from developed villages and 24 from underdeveloped ones, feel that owning land would give women a greater say in household decision-making. These women associate land

ownership with status, greater autonomy and respect within the family, enabling them to actively engage in household governance.

Respondent 24 (developed village) highlights female inclusion in decision-making, stating:

“Women are actually included in decision-making. In some households, women even take the upper hand.”

Respondent 79 (developed village) reflects on the correlation between ownership and household influence:

“I believe that land gives women a sense of security, and with ownership comes responsibility that naturally brings a voice in family matters.”

Respondent 14 (underdeveloped village) points to a shift in perception towards landowning women:

“Land ownership changes the dynamics. A woman who owns land is seen as someone capable, not just a caretaker.”

Respondent 19 (underdeveloped village) added:

“It is not just about having land. It is also about the confidence, security and autonomy it provides, as in our society, land is tied to authority.”

Respondent 161 (underdeveloped village) admits and thinks that:

“Ownership brings recognition. I feel it would make my voice matter more.”

However, a considerable proportion of 80 respondents (40%), do not associate land ownership with authority in household decision-making, suggesting that merely possessing land is not enough to alter traditional family structures, particularly in a patriarchal society reinforcing cultural expectations that

prioritise male-dominated governance. This group comprised 41 respondents from developed villages and 39 from underdeveloped ones.

Respondent 67 (developed village) argues that women naturally make household decisions, independent of land ownership:

“Even without land ownership, women most of the time make decisions regarding family matters. I don’t think there would be much difference in the level of decision-making.”

Respondent 85 (developed village) reinforces this, stating:

“In reality, women make most of the household decisions.”

Respondent 83 (developed village) acknowledges the division between household responsibilities and land governance:

“Irrespective of land ownership, women engage in household decision-making. In our culture, home is the domain of the women. Just that we don’t have a say in the decisions or matters of the clan.”

Respondent 150 (developed village) reinforced this distinction:

“We equally make decisions for the welfare of our family. But on issues such as clan property and land, I may give my opinion but am not part of the decision-making.”

Respondent 97 (underdeveloped village) clarified that while women influence household decisions, land-related matters remain under male authority:

“Even in my family, my husband and I discuss matters related to the household. I am not denied on that matter. But land is another story. I, as a woman, do not interfere in that.”

These insights indicate that decision-making within households is mostly separated from land ownership and that women, irrespective of their property

ownership, carry out key domestic responsibilities but are excluded in matters of land or clan.

Furthermore, 68 respondents (34%), comprising 31 from developed villages and 37 from underdeveloped ones, expressed uncertainty regarding whether land ownership influences and impacts decision-making within the household. Their responses highlight that the relationship between property and decision-making is unclear and varies greatly depending on individual circumstances, household dynamics, or societal perceptions.

Respondent 39 (developed village) questions the importance of land ownership in determining decision-making roles:

“I don’t feel that way. When it comes to decision-making, others might be wiser or more capable. It all depends on the household.”

Respondent 49 (developed village) argues that decision-making should not be dictated by property ownership:

“It does not mean that I would have a bigger voice if I had land. We are all humans and should have equal rights, and it does not mean if I had land, I have all the rights unlike the others.”

Respondent 51 (developed village) reinforces the influence of broader household dynamics:

“Even if a woman might not have any ownership, I feel we would all be the same. In the end, it all depends on the household.”

Respondent 53 (developed village) emphasised the individual differences, stating:

“Depends on the individual, but having land does not mean my value is greater than the others who don’t have it. Who knows, even if I have land, I may be more docile than the others.”

Respondent 37 (developed village) also added:

“We engage in household decision-making wherever needed. So, holding ownership won’t matter much or bring that much difference.”

All these narratives demonstrate how household authority and decision-making are influenced by family dynamics, individual characteristics, and mutual respect matter more than formal property rights. They also highlight how cultural socialisation continues to define gender roles, regardless of legal ownership. Thus, while land ownership can provide a sense of empowerment and formal authority for some women, it does not automatically alter the patriarchal norms followed and practised within Ao society.

Beyond formal ownership, confidence and capacity to manage property are vital indicators of empowerment. In a culture where property management is typically male-dominated, this analysis examines Ao women’s perspectives on their own capabilities. Do they feel confident in managing land-related responsibilities? Do they believe they can handle property as competently as men? This section sheds light on the perceived competence and aspirations of women in handling property matters.

Table 5.20 Capability of handling property like men

Capability of handling property like men	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency (%)
Yes	89	50	139 (69.5%)
No	4	15	19 (9.5%)
No Idea	7	35	42 (21%)
Total	100	100	200 (100%)

A significant majority of 139 respondents (69.5%) feel that women can manage property just as effectively as men. This comprised 89 respondents from developed villages and 50 from underdeveloped villages, indicating that, irrespective of the differences between the villages, a strong sense of capability and acknowledgement of women's capability and competence is shared by women when it comes to managing and handling property.

Many respondents emphasised that management skills can be learnt over time and are not inherently linked to gender, stating that women, if given the opportunity, would handle responsibilities effectively. Respondent 15 (underdeveloped village) reflects on her personal experience of managing household affairs:

“Eldest brother is not at home. I look after our parents and household activities and farming. So, if given the opportunity, I feel I will be equally capable.”

Respondent 16 (underdeveloped village), a divorced woman with two sons, highlighted:

“We have to do what it takes to earn an income since I am jobless. Owning a piece of property would help a lot and would make me accountable to take care and live off it.”

Respondent 26 (developed village) also noted:

“My husband is in the army and is out of station all the time. While building our house everything was looked after by me and every household matter was managed by me. Of course, I have faced difficulties, but generally I feel I am capable. Because it has been that way.”

Respondent 20 (underdeveloped village) firmly rejected gender-based assumptions and stated:

“I believe I am equally capable. Just because I am a woman does not mean I cannot manage properties.”

Several respondents also challenged the traditional assumption that property management is inherently male-dominated and gender-specific. Respondent 89 (underdeveloped village) argued:

“Did men get that ability from the beginning instantly? No. They too learned and understood with time. The same goes for women as well.”

Respondent 97 (underdeveloped village) highlights that women are already managing critical aspects of family life, stating:

“Not saying it is the case for all, but men usually depend on women in household matters. Wives, in general, take care of the family. So, I don’t think it will be any different to look after such properties.”

Respondent 70 (developed village) acknowledges the historical biases behind the male domination but sees positive changes due to education and modernisation:

“Back then, properties were in the hands of men as they were seen as capable of protecting them. Women were viewed as dependent and inferior. But now, with education and advancement, perceptions are changing. If given the opportunity, I feel I can manage with the proper support. Physically, we may be weaker, but in terms of management, we can handle what needs to be done.”

However, Respondent 141 (developed village) challenges the historical view that women are less capable and commented:

“The belief that women ‘cannot handle property like men do’ is a social construct. It might have been true to some extent in the

past due to lack of education and awareness. But now, women have grown out of that mindset and have proved to be as good as men, if not better in some cases. Management skills come with maturity, not gender. However, the goal is not about outdoing each other but outgrowing outdated mindsets.”

Respondent 142 (developed village) questions why gender is even a factor in property management:

“I don’t know if the gender issue should arise here. How are properties supposed to be managed anyway? If a property belongs to a person, irrespective of the gender, it is their decision whether to sell it, turn it into a farm, rent it, or do whatever they choose.”

Despite the strong consensus on women’s capability, a small minority of 19 respondents (9.5%), four from developed and 15 from underdeveloped villages, expressed doubts and believed that women are incapable of managing property in the same way as men, indicating internalised gender biases and acceptance of marginalisation in property ownership, its rights and management.

Respondent 171 (underdeveloped village) acknowledges limitations but believes financial security can compensate:

“Physically it would not be like men but even if physically not possible if we are economically well off then I believe I can.”

Respondent 45 (developed village) expressed uncertainty but is willing to make an effort:

“I don’t think I am as capable as men. But I would try my best to manage and utilise what I have. What is needed will be identified or learnt, and I will try my best to use it to my advantage.”

Respondent 47 (developed village) frames capability as situational and age-dependent:

“It depends on the individual. If I were given property now as a senior citizen, I would not be able to manage it and would hand it over to someone else. However, if I had owned property earlier in life, I would have managed and utilised it for my benefit.”

Respondent 123 (underdeveloped village) reflects on the societal norms restricting women’s involvement in property affairs:

“In our society roles are assigned differently for both men and women. I as a woman, do not think I can do it as a man.”

Respondent 25 (developed village) also added she feels she is capable yet does not enforce because of the customs:

“Taking care of one’s own property should be done irrespective of gender. I, as a woman, can take responsibility and manage the property as well as a man could. But knowing that it is against our customs, I would not want to interfere in the domains of men.”

In contrast, a considerable number of 42 respondents (21%), notably more from underdeveloped villages (35) than from developed ones (7), remained uncertain whether women can or cannot manage the properties like men. The highlighted that women have historically been excluded from property management, leaving them unsure of their capability due to lack of exposure or opportunity.

Respondent 12 (underdeveloped village) stated:

“How would not know unless given the opportunity?”

Respondent 163 (underdeveloped village) reflects how social norms have shaped their perceptions:

“Physically men are stronger, and such rights are only with men. It has never been managed by us and we never know unless we try.”

Respondent 88 (underdeveloped village) acknowledged that exclusion prevents women from fully realising their abilities:

“Since it has always been in our practice, we do not know or think about it. But if practised, then why not?”

Respondent 54 (developed village) highlights the lack of ownership as a factor preventing women from gaining management skills:

“Since I don’t have any ownership, I have no idea. But when it comes to capability, I feel it depends on the individual.”

The responses indicate that while perceptions of female capability in property management are shifting, access to land remains an issue, limiting women’s ability to prove their capability in practice.

Having examined women’s decision-making roles related to property, we now explore how property ownership affects women’s empowerment within the family. Owning land allows women to assert control over household resources, contribute to family welfare, and secure a stronger negotiating position within family structures. As noted by Shrestha (2009), women who own land are less likely to experience economic vulnerability and are better positioned to improve their family’s well-being. Similarly, Allendorf (2007) underscores the transformative power of land ownership in empowering women within their family. Under this second dimension, we examine Ao Naga women’s perspectives on the significance and implications of land ownership through three interrelated aspects: the significance of land ownership, land as a deterrent to domestic violence and generational security.

The significance of land ownership in advancing women's empowerment is undeniable, enabling them to make autonomous choices, assert rights, and access essential services. In traditional societies like the Ao Nagas, where property represents more than just economic value, it serves as a symbol of autonomy and dignity. This section explores what land ownership means to Ao women, including its impact on financial independence, self-worth, and their ability to negotiate within patriarchal frameworks.

Table 5.21 Significance of land ownership

Significance of land ownership	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency/ (%)
Less likely to experience economic vulnerability	5	13	18 (9%)
Bargaining Power	Nil	1	1 (0.5%)
More decision making and political clout	5	10	15 (7.5%)
Enhance the welfare and wellbeing of family	43	31	74 (37%)
All of the above	11	23	34 (17%)
Economic wellbeing, Decision Making, Family Welfare	32	22	54 (27 %)
Bargaining Power, Decision Making, Family Welfare	4	Nil	4 (2%)
Total	100	100	200 (100%)

The views on the advantages of land ownership varied among the respondents although the majority recognize its role in enhancing economic security and overall well-being. For 18 respondents (9%), five from developed villages and 13 from underdeveloped villages, identified land ownership as a key factor in reducing economic vulnerability, stating that property ownership offers financial security and long-term stability. Respondent 14 (underdeveloped village), an unemployed mother, emphasises the necessity of property ownership as a means of survival:

“It gives me a sense of peace and security and a rest of mind because I am rest assured that I can give or leave something to my daughters. My son would get his share from his clan and my daughters would also have something for them as well.”

Respondent 98 (underdeveloped village) described how land could provide stability:

“Both me and my husband is unemployed. He is a manual labourer, and we have 2 offspring to look after. His earnings and the produce from our field is often not enough most of the time. Of course, we have my husband’s clan land and we depend on that for our agriculture, but it is not something which is permanent or our own specifically. Instead, if we had acquired land in our name, we could have utilised it in more ways for our sustenance.”

While economic security is widely acknowledged, one respondent (0.5%) from an underdeveloped village opted for bargaining power as the sole advantage of land ownership. Respondent 171 (underdeveloped village), a landowner, describes the status associated with property ownership:

“When a woman owns land, her words carry more weight. It automatically brings a status. Even if we don’t say anything, people take notice and listen when they know we have something of our own.”

For 15 respondents (7.5%), five from developed villages and 10 from underdeveloped villages, they linked land ownership to enhanced decision-making power and political influence, reinforcing the connection between property rights and women’s agency within the household and community structures.

Respondent 184 (underdeveloped village) connected land ownership to exclusion and societal recognition, stating:

“The fact that we are not given the right to land might be connected to the fact that we are not involved in Senso Mungdang (Village Conference). Maybe with that right we can all be a part of the Senso Mungdang.”

A significant portion of 74 respondents (37%) perceived land ownership as a key factor in enhancing the welfare and well-being of women and their families, with 43 respondents from developed villages and 31 from underdeveloped villages. This highlights how women with property are better positioned to secure long-term stability for their families.

Respondent 43 (developed village) mentions:

“Whoever they may be one would be empowered. If one has land, it’s a good thing. One would feel secure, and, in the future, it would be a great help if some unforeseen circumstance arose.

A considerable 34 respondents (17%), 11 from developed villages and 23 from underdeveloped villages, recognised all the above benefits of land ownership, reinforcing a broad awareness of land ownership as a tool for economic security, decision-making, and family welfare. Respondent 83 (underdeveloped village) stated the impact land ownership would bring on personal and financial stability:

“For me, land ownership would be everything: security, stability, and a voice in my household.”

Respondent 78 (underdeveloped village) mentions how having land would bring social and personal changes:

“It would be a totally different situation than how things are now. Would probably change how I live and how others see me.

I would feel less dependent, more confident, and more respected.”

Another 54 respondents (27%), 32 from developed villages and 22 from underdeveloped villages, linked economic well-being, decision-making ability, and family welfare as the primary advantages of land ownership. Their responses suggest that land provides women not only financial security but also influence within family dynamics, allowing them to participate more actively in household management and decision-making.

Respondent 54 (developed village) -highlights the significance of owning land, even without inheritance rights:

“Even if I don’t inherit land, owning something of my own would mean a great accomplishment for me.”

Respondent 97 (underdeveloped village) reinforces the broader implications of property ownership beyond financial gain:

“Property ownership makes women stronger, not just in money but in every part of our life.”

A smaller group of four respondents (2%) from developed villages mentioned bargaining power, decision-making, and family welfare as combined benefits, stating that property ownership strengthens women’s negotiating ability in household and community affairs.

Respondent 194 (underdeveloped village) discussed how land ownership could reshape women’s societal status, stating:

“I believe one of the most significant things that define status in our society apart from decision-making, is the ownership of the land. Owning property will have a huge impact on feeling a sense of being empowered. Because ownership comes with decision-making ability.”

Overall, the perspectives of Ao women primarily reflect land ownership as crucial for their empowerment, particularly in enhancing family welfare and increasing their participation in decision-making. The varied responses also indicate an evolving awareness of how property ownership can elevate women's status in both private and public spheres, although experiences and priorities differ between women in developed and underdeveloped villages in Ao society.

The focus of the second analysis is on the relationship between land ownership and protection against domestic violence. Through the perspectives of Ao women on this issue, we try to understand whether owning property contributes to reducing their vulnerability in family settings. This section aims to understand if property offers not just economic security but also emotional and physical security in potentially abusive environments.

Table 5.22 Land as domestic violence deterrent

Land as domestic violence deterrent	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency (%)
Yes	74	78	152 (76%)
No	9	7	16 (8%)
No Idea	17	15	32 (16%)
Total	100	100	200 (100%)

The findings reveal that a significant majority of 152 respondents (76%) believe that land ownership offers some level of protection from domestic violence. This opinion is consistent in both developed (74) and underdeveloped (78) villages, indicating that women with property are less vulnerable to abuse, as ownership provides financial autonomy, exit options in abusive relationships, and bargaining power in household dynamics.

Respondent 20 (underdeveloped developed village) highlights how land provides a sense of stability and control, stating:

“A home or a plot of land would automatically give the bearer a sense of security and more decision-making ability.”

Respondent 10 (developed village) expresses how having property would shift the power dynamics within difficult situations, explaining:

“If I had land in my name, I wouldn’t be as helpless. It would give me a reason to stand firm, even in hard times.”

While the majority support the idea that property can offer protection, 16 respondents (8%) nine from developed villages and seven from underdeveloped villages however, disagreed with this notion, indicating that although land ownership can be beneficial, it may not be adequate by itself to stop domestic violence.

Respondent 2 (developed village) sees alternative income sources as a more powerful tool than land ownership alone:

“No. I would rather be financially independent doing some other business. I don’t think having land alone would guarantee such things.”

Respondent 4 (developed village) stresses the importance of education in empowering women to navigate difficult situations:

“I believe not alone, but with education. Land is helpful, yes, but education changes how we handle things.”

Meanwhile, a notable portion of 32 respondents (16%) expressed uncertainty, with responses nearly evenly distributed between developed (17) and underdeveloped (15) villages. This uncertainty relates to women who have yet to understand the direct or indirect protective benefits associated with economic stability that often comes with land ownership due to lack of exposure.

Respondent 181 (underdeveloped village) acknowledges variations in personal circumstances, suggesting that land ownership may only help certain individuals:

“I am not sure. However, not everyone is equal or fortunate. Everyone’s destiny is different, and for some, having such a property might be the change or the good thing that they needed.”

Respondent 75 (developed village) admits to never considering land ownership as a factor in preventing domestic violence, stating:

“I have never thought of land that way. Maybe it helps, but I wouldn’t know unless I go through something like that.”

In addition to deterring domestic violence, the respondents also believed that property ownership empowers women more broadly by providing economic self-sufficiency, upward mobility, and heightened self-esteem. Property ownership enables women to take charge of their lives and fight against repressive patriarchal systems in matters related to their wellbeing, besides the inheritance practices. This, in turn, equips them to navigate and overcome oppressive situations.

Expanding on the discussion of domestic violence deterrence through land ownership, the focus shifts to the long-term implications, particularly in ensuring generational security and stability. This concluding section of the second dimension examines how Ao women perceive the potential of property ownership to secure the future of their children and empower subsequent generations.

Table 5.23 Property rights and generational security

Property rights and generational security	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency/ (%)
Yes	81	84	165 (82.5%)
No	6	5	11 (5.5%)
No Idea	13	11	24 (12%)
Total	100	100	200 (100%)

Among those who view land as a critical factor in securing future generations, 165 respondents (82.5%), 81 from developed villages and 84 from underdeveloped villages expressed that owning property ensures financial resilience and prevents instability in the long run. They perceive property not just as a means for personal economic empowerment but also as an essential basis for the future well-being of their children and descendants.

Respondent 161 (underdeveloped village) emphasises that the value of property increases over time, stating:

“Land as a property does not disappear with time. Instead, it is a permanent asset, and its value increases with time. Having the right to inherit such a property would definitely give us security.”

Respondent 109 (underdeveloped village) describes how the sense of belonging linked to inherited property fosters emotional and financial security:

“Very much. I belong to my father. My father gave me this. My father bought it for me. See when that happens, I feel secure, a sense of security and foundation. I am proud of my father. My belonging that nobody has but I have, my father gave me. That feeling empowers me greatly.”

Respondent 64 (developed village), who acquired property with her husband, sharing her experience, stated:

“When we bought the land for our offspring, it gave me a sense of pride knowing that I was able to do something for them and give them a secure life to live.”

In contrast, only a small group of 11 respondents (5.5%), six from developed villages and five from underdeveloped villages, disagreed, suggesting that owning property alone does not guarantee generational security. These individuals believe that other factors, such as education or employment, are more crucial for generational prosperity. Respondent 150 (developed village) expresses scepticism about property inheritance alone, stating:

“Property inheritance alone does not guarantee it.”

Respondent 2 (developed village) argues for the greater importance of education over land rights, stating:

“No. Not much, instead education would. Let the properties be with men. Rather, women should concentrate on education.”

Besides that, 24 respondents (12%) reported being unsure about the relationship between property rights and generational security, with 13 respondents from developed villages and 11 from underdeveloped villages, suggesting a disconnection from discussions related to property ownership and inheritance practices. Respondent 13 (underdeveloped village) describes how gender-based restrictions on property inheritance present challenges, stating:

“Property ownership is in the hands of men. If I get any, then I would probably face more problems.”

The perspectives indicate that the majority of Ao women view property rights as essential for ensuring their family’s future, acknowledging the lasting advantages of economic resources for several generations, and highlight an

increasing awareness that women's ownership of land and property is not just a matter of personal empowerment but also of creating lasting social and economic foundations for their families.

Beyond decision-making authority and perceived empowerment within the family, we now turn to the third dimension: the transformative impacts of property ownership on women's lives. Under this dimension, focus is laid on the sense of empowerment derived from property ownership and the impact or changes it brings.

Property ownership is often seen as a crucial factor in empowering women, particularly in developing countries (Berg et al., 2010). It offers security, autonomy, and access to financial resources. Legal ownership allows women to apply for loans, invest in businesses, and plan for the future (Shrestha, 2009). However, the relationship between property ownership and women's empowerment is not always evident. A study by Toktas et al. (2013) found that women in Türkiye did not necessarily feel empowered by owning property. Instead, education and career advancement were seen as more significant factors in their empowerment.

Drawing from these contrasting insights, this section examines whether Ao women feel a genuine sense of empowerment through property ownership and how their experience relates to previous research findings.

Table 5.24 Empowerment through Property Owned

Empowerment through property ownership	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency/ (%)
Yes	17	4	21 (10.5%)
No	83	96	179 (89.5%)
No Idea	Nil	Nil	Nil
Total	100	100	200 (100%)

The 21 women (10.5%) who own property acknowledged that it contributes to their empowerment. This indicates that only a small minority of Ao Naga women experienced empowerment as a result of owning property.

Respondent 52 (developed village) expressed a practical view:

“If I had land, and when I say land, it means acquired land. I can be self-reliant. I don’t exactly have to depend on men. Other women might think that way. But for me it is the recognition and security that comes with acquiring the property that makes me empowered.”

Respondent 53 (developed village), reflecting on emotional aspects, stated:

“Not exactly feels extra empowering because I own land. But I have that very strong sense of security. If someday my husband passes away unexpectedly or if an emergency arises me, I have a land to go back to that I can depend on. I cannot sell my husband’s clan land, but since we have our acquired property, I can always use it to help me out in times of trouble.”

Notably, the significant majority of 179 respondents (89.5%) indicated that they do not feel empowered since they do not own any property. For Ao women, deeply ingrained societal norms limit their ability to own property, offering deeper insights into the broader implications of property ownership and women’s empowerment.

Respondent 12 (underdeveloped village) said plainly:

“Would never get the right to properties. Does not have any idea.”

Respondent 182 (underdeveloped village) echoed this limitation:

“Do not have any property, so how would I know? Liba dang ko metetbio da ya? We will know only if we have it, right?”

Respondent 200 (underdeveloped village) dismissed the question entirely:

“I am not the right person to answer that question.”

Interestingly, some respondents questioned whether ownership alone necessarily results in empowerment. Respondent 141 (underdeveloped village) explained:

“If given the opportunity, I’d be lying if I said no, I would feel empowered. However, this empowerment wouldn’t be because I now own a property, but because it was made possible for a woman to own something that wasn’t originally considered the norm in the first place.”

While Respondent 24 (developed village) stated:

“I think empowerment and owning property are different things and remain unparalleled.”

The analysis highlights that while a small minority who owns property feels empowered, the majority expressed that they did not feel empowered since they don’t own any property. More importantly, among those who own property, it varies significantly, and the meaning attached to acquired property ownership is seen as more empowering than traditional inheritance.

Property ownership serves as a powerful catalyst for transformative changes in women’s lives, often resulting in improvements in gender roles and societal perceptions of women. Having examined the impact of property ownership on women’s empowerment, the concluding analysis of this chapter delves into the specific changes that property ownership brings, as expressed by respondents who own property.

Table 5.25 Changes brought by property ownership

Changes brought by Property ownership	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency/ %
Living standards in family and society	1	0	1
Decision-making role	2	0	2
Economic development	4	2	6
All of the above	10	2	12
Owns Property Total (N=21)	17	4	21 (10.5%)

When it comes to the transformative impacts of property ownership by respondents who own property, one respondent from a developed village attributed land ownership to improved living standards in family and society.

Respondent 46 (developed village), a widow with no offspring, noted:

“Asen lokti nung amitsur takum a kechi jenjang ali? -In our society what status does a widow have? Literally nothing, plus I don’t even have an offspring. But my family takes care of and even gave me the privilege to construct a house on my father’s clan land. I am living a stable life and at the same time feels recognised.”

Another two respondents from developed villages identified decision-making authority as the main advantage of owning property.

Respondent 8 (developed village) highlighted:

“Land in whatever form it maybe has an economic value attached to it. I can farm on it and sell the produce or I can sell the firewood from it as well. But when it comes to the extreme, I can sell it too, endless possibilities are there and in all those options I have a say and can decide on it.”

While six respondents, four from developed and two from underdeveloped villages, acknowledged economic development as the primary change brought by property ownership. Respondent 4 (developed village) stated:

“The change the property ownership brought to my life specifically, I would say is economic benefits. Our acquired property is in one of the main areas of the town, and the rent we get from the house we have built on it has been very beneficial since both me and my husband is retired. It has been a stable source of income for us.”

Respondent 21 (developed village) stated that it gives her a sense of security and peace of mind:

“I am rest assured that I have something to depend on at the same time leave something for my daughters. My son would get his share from his clan so my daughters also have something for them as well. Knowing that thought gives me peace of mind.”

Respondent 174 (underdeveloped village) mentioned:

“Parents acquired property was given to me and my sister. I of course feel a sense of belongingness in that. Moreover, it financially empowers me and my sister. It opens many prospects for us”

Meanwhile, 12 respondents, ten from developed villages and two from underdeveloped villages, stated that land ownership contributes to their economic stability, which improved their living standards, as well as gave them decision-making ability. Respondent 81 (developed village), who received land from her parents through their will, stated:

“The property that I own was given to me by parents, and it is in my name alone even though I am married. It belongs to me, and the matters related to it depends on me. Moreover, like my

parents did for me, I will also hand it down to my daughter. My husband and his male kin or clan cannot take it away.”

Respondent 101 (underdeveloped village) mentioned:

“Having land has changed how I live my life. It gave me not just a home but a foundation and has brought stability and dignity in my life.”

Respondent 171 (underdeveloped village) talked about the improved status that comes along with property ownership:

“We don’t just acquire land just for the sake of acquiring it. Firstly, we are capable enough to acquire it. That already empowers us, at the same time owning a property has it added advantages. We don’t need to mention it specifically, as we all know how important land is to us.”

These experiences illustrate the effects of owning property, which is not limited to financial autonomy but also includes a stronger voice in family decisions, increased self-esteem, and improved social status. Interestingly, as compared to the perceived significance of property ownership, none of the respondents mentioned the social and political clout as a direct benefit of land ownership. This can be seen from the experience of Respondent 26 (developed village), who stated:

“I have joint ownership with my husband, but I don’t feel much advantage due to it. Of course, the property gives me sense of security but besides that socially and politically, my status is still the same. i.e., under my husband or men.”

The above analysis highlights the transformative potential of property ownership, coupled with its impact on women’s empowerment. For Ao Naga women, owning property is more than just a financial asset; it serves as a key factor in their empowerment, respect and stronger voice. While societal norms

often limit women's right to own and inherit property, those who do own land find themselves feeling secure, stable, and self-sufficient, emphasising the importance of property ownership in shaping opportunities and improving the lives of women in Ao society.

5.7 Overview

This chapter examines the inheritance practice of Ao society through a gendered lens, focusing on exploring how the traditional practices, societal norms and customary laws influence the property ownership status of women in developed and underdeveloped villages in Ao society. It explored key aspects, such as the distribution of property, its control, and the factors that determine its inheritance and authority. The chapter further focused on exploring the conflicts arising from property ownership and distribution, while also analysing the extent to which property ownership contributes to women's sense of empowerment within their family and society in general. All these aspects are explored comparatively between developed and underdeveloped villages and are discussed under six headings, an overview of which is highlighted as follows:

1. With regard to the property ownership status of women in Ao society, and as seen from the data, limited access to property was evident, where none of the respondents (0%) owned ancestral clan property. This highlights the complete exclusion of women from inheriting clan-owned property, which is supported by customary laws and tradition. When it came to acquired property, only 21 respondents (10.5%) out of 200 respondents reported owning it, with 17 from developed villages and 4 from underdeveloped villages, reflecting a difference in property acquisition and its ownership between developed and underdeveloped villages in Ao society. Among the 21 respondents owning property, seven of them owned only land (bare plots with no structures), while 14 owned lands with buildings and household assets. The data therefore highlights a clear, deep-rooted gender disparity in property rights among women in Ao society. Moreover, the

properties that were acquired were mostly in urban areas instead of being within villages.

2. The factors influencing the property ownership of Ao women were discussed under four sub-headings. The primary mode of acquiring property was by purchasing it, with 13 respondents from developed villages and two from underdeveloped villages acquiring property in this way. Inheritance through parents' wills was another way where three respondents from developed villages inherited their parents' acquired property, and 1 respondent from a developed village and two respondents from underdeveloped villages were given temporary ownership rights or usufructuary of their father's ancestral property. On the factors influencing property acquisition, personal income played a role for six respondents, all of whom were from developed villages. Income and marital status helped 9 respondents (7 from developed and 2 from underdeveloped) to obtain their property, while the rest got it through a will or were given temporary rights to the property. When it came to eligibility to own ancestral property, only men: fathers (22.5%) and husbands (67.5%) are considered eligible to own ancestral property. For the determinants of ownership rights, (72%) attributed it to the combination of clan, descent and patriarchy, and the remainder pointed to clan (8.5%) and patriarchy (7.5%), with more views from underdeveloped villages, and marriage and self-acquisition (12%) reflected more views from developed villages. Thus, ownership of ancestral properties in Ao society is tied to clan, descent and patriarchy, terminating in women being excluded from rights to inheritance. Financial independence wherever applicable and consequent economic stability make women circumvent the traditional practices and enable them to acquire property through purchase. In this connection, marriage plays an important role as women can jointly acquire properties along with their husbands through their shared income. Inheritance through wills also manifests in gradual shifts in hitherto unaccomplished practices, especially in developed villages. However, despite socio-economic and regional differences between developed and underdeveloped villages, patriarchal customs and

traditional practices nonetheless remain unchallenged and dictate the terms regarding inheritance practice, claim of ownership and eligibility to inherit it in Ao society.

3. When it comes to the basis of entitlement to inheritance, clan and lineage (79%) play a dominant role, with respondents from developed villages (82) sharing this opinion more compared to underdeveloped villages (76). Gender (19%) as an independent determinant was acknowledged more by respondents from underdeveloped villages (23). And transfer through a will was highlighted by respondents from developed villages alone (3 or 1.5%). And when no male offspring are present, the next male kin inherit the property, all of which highlights the resilience of patriarchy and traditional customs in inheritance practices. The data also revealed a dominant pattern of male family members, particularly husbands (67.5%), fathers (22%) and sons (10%), controlling ancestral property, and women's roles were limited to advisory roles at best with no decision-making ability when it comes to ancestral properties. When it comes to acquiring property owners, control over property was shared jointly between husband and wife among 15 respondents (7.5%), which was more in developed villages (15 compared to 4), and in such cases, it was also indicated that the property acquired jointly was made mostly in the husband's name. Also, the cases of property owned individually by the women alone are extremely rare, with only 3 respondents (1.5%), and that is also from developed villages alone. Thus, customary practices continue to dictate property inheritance through male lineage, and women's access to and control over property is systemically restricted, not just by customary practices and traditions but also because women themselves internalise it, so they do not perceive ancestral property ownership as their right in Ao society.
4. While analysing property rights and gender in the inheritance practice in Ao society, it is observed that 176 respondents (88%) stated that resources are not distributed equally and that there is universal male preference when it comes to inheritance. Meanwhile, 160 respondents (80%) agree that societal norms and patriarchy dominate the practice, but 19 respondents

(9.5%) view patriarchy as natural and non-discriminatory. However, despite the patriarchal dominance, only 15 respondents (7.5%) acknowledge that there is patriarchal property abuse, while the majority denied it. Also, the respondents acknowledged that cultural practices drive the inheritance practice, and non-adherence to it leads to negative sanctions, as opined by 180 respondents (90%). This highlights that patriarchal norms are deeply internalised despite demographic differences, and women usually accept male dominance in inheritance as the norm and do share a similar attitude towards gendered tolerance. Thus, gender discrimination in inheritance practice is complex, with predominant cultural traditions as the foundation of the practice, and moreover, resistance or going against the norms leads to sanctions, discouraging women from questioning the inheritance norms.

5. In the conflicts over property rights in Ao society, only one respondent from a developed village was involved in property-related conflict (intestate succession dispute), which has been taken as a case study. Besides that, regarding the perception of siblings' disputes over property, 20 respondents (10%) believed that such disputes do arise, primarily over acquired properties of parents rather than ancestral properties. Moreover, besides the conflicts over property, when asked about the problems in family due to lack of property, the majority opined that they did not face any issue, while 16 respondents (8%), slightly from underdeveloped villages (7 vs. 9), experienced problems such as economic dependence and limited decision-making abilities. A significant majority of 130 respondents (65%) also believed that women asserting their right to inherit property often leads to backlash from society, with respondents from developed villages sharing this perspective more (73 vs. 57), in which the respondents shared the 33% seat reservation for women in ULB elections as a cautionary tale. The further demand for rights to ancestral properties would invite the risk of tensions within the family, as opined by 167 respondents (83.5%). The persistent fight for rights to ancestral property would result in severe consequences, with women facing social exclusion,

emotional turmoil and even violence, as it is taken as a threat to the prevalent cultural norm rather than emergent progressive change. Comparatively, inheritance disputes and the fear of violence escalation over persistent demands for rights seem to appear more in developed villages as against undeveloped villages.

6. Property ownership or lack thereof influences women's autonomy, decision-making and empowerment within the family and society. In the Ao Naga context women often lack full autonomy over land, and this can be seen from the data where the majority of 185 respondents (92.5%) reported having no control over landed property. Only 6 respondents (3%), all from developed villages, had autonomy over their acquired property, while the remaining nine respondents (4.5%) jointly shared the decision-making ability with their husbands. This highlights that ownership leads to real decision-making ability but is rare among the respondents, and it was seen that there is higher financial independence in developed villages as a result of which more women own acquired property. When it comes to empowerment, household decision-making authority is a critical aspect, but only 52 respondents (26%), in which 28 were developed & 24 underdeveloped, opined that property ownership would enhance their household decision-making ability. In contrast, 80 respondents (40%), with 41 developed and 39 underdeveloped, disagreed, stating that household decision-making is already women's domain and ownership of property does not matter. The analysis also examines the perspectives of women's capability to manage property, and 139 respondents (69.5%), 89 from developed and 50 from underdeveloped, believed that women are as capable as men in managing land. 19 respondents (9.5%) and 42 respondents (21%), the majority of whom were from underdeveloped villages, felt that women could not manage or were not sure of their capabilities. This shows that the perception of capability is high in developed villages, but the exclusion of women from ownership undermines their capabilities. On the perception of the significance of property ownership, the majority of 74 respondents (37%) viewed property

ownership as key to individual and family welfare, while the rest viewed it as essential for economic security, bargaining ability and decision-making ability. Moreover, 152 respondents (76%) opined that property ownership reduces vulnerability to domestic violence, and 165 respondents (82.5%) believed property ensures security for future generations. Also, when it comes to the respondents who owned acquired property, they tended to claim economic stability and decision-making ability, while others mentioned improved livelihood, peace of mind and security. As such, joint ownership was in developed villages, with women having more confidence in management capability. Thus, in spite of the transformative potential of property ownership, coupled with its impact on women's empowerment, Ao women do not have the right to inherit ancestral properties.

In the next chapter, the barriers to their rights to own and inherit property are examined and explored.

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Chapter VI

Barriers to women's access to property

6.0 Introduction

6.1 Experiences of Discrimination

6.2 Gender Bias in Property Rights

6.3 Accessibility Barriers

6.4 Reforming Tradition

6.5 Role of government and civil society organisations

6.6 Focus Group Discussion

6.7 Case study

6.8 An Overview

Chapter VI

Barriers to women's access to property

6.0 Introduction

The previous chapter examined the gendered dimension of property inheritance in Ao society, highlighting the disparities in property ownership and its control. It looked at aspects such as the property ownership status of Ao women, where it was seen that only a few women owned acquired property, and when it came to the factors that influenced their property ownership, it was primarily acquired jointly with their husband or through their personal income. At the same time, although rare, some women inherit their parents' acquired properties through a will, while a few were given temporary permission to use their fathers' ancestral land.

The distribution and control of properties was also examined, and it was seen that inheritance is based on clan membership and patriarchal authority shaping the ownership and control of property. Gender disparities exist profoundly and are deeply rooted, as ancestral properties are inherited by men alone, influenced by the traditional practices and cultural norms of Ao society. However, even though the inheritance practice is discriminatory in nature, Ao women still adhere to the norms without questioning or going against them due to societal pressure and cultural traditions, resulting in minimal property disputes, and when conflicts do arise, it is mostly in terms of daughters being wrongfully dispossessed of their parents' acquired properties. Moreover, women who own acquired properties experience economic empowerment, financial security and decision-making ability, which greatly enhances their status as well as the overall well-being of the family in general.

Land in tribal societies is connected to their cultural identity, participation in decision-making and political power. But in general, Ao women are excluded from inheriting and owning ancestral clan properties due to the prevailing inheritance practice. These customary practices and traditional norms create

significant barriers for women, restricting their rights and ability to own properties and ultimately excluding them from inheritance.

In this chapter, a closer analysis of the barriers that hinder women's access to property and their ability to inherit it is carried out. The term 'barriers' in the context of inheritance rights refers to the social, legal, cultural, and financial obstacles that prevent women from acquiring, claiming, or obtaining legitimate rights to property ownership (Agarwal, 1994; Deere & Doss, 2006). These barriers are in terms of structural barriers like the patriarchal norms and customary laws or the attitude that stems from gendered ideologies or perceptions and societal expectations that prevail in a society.

Globally, such barriers manifest in women's limited access to land (Boone, 2013; Artur & Hilhorst, 2014; Chant & McIlwaine, 2015; Achandi et al., 2018). It affects their access to and utilisation of the land and its resources (Chigbu, 2019), leading to restrictions in decision-making (Razavi, 2007), economic dependence and marginalisation (Meinzen-Dick et al., 2019). Beyond that, conflict between statutory laws that promote gender equality occurs with the customary laws that override it (Doss et al., 2015). All these factors create a cycle and tradition where women are marginalised when it comes to the rights to property ownership, reinforcing their vulnerability within economic and social hierarchies, which are all justified through tradition.

The limited access to inheritance and property rights of women in Ao society is a reflection of the culmination of tradition, customary law, political structure, land use systems, clan structure, kinship practices and identity related to land. Despite some women owning property acquired through purchase or via parents' will, they remain excluded from the ancestral clan, creating disparities in property ownership with only men having the rights to own and inherit it. As such, this chapter will identify the factors that act as barriers and impede women's access to inheritance of properties in Ao society

and, at the same time, evaluate the societal efforts towards women's standing on property inheritance under the following thematic headings:

1. Experiences of discrimination
2. Gender bias in property rights
3. Accessibility issues
4. Reforming traditions
5. Role of government and social society
6. Focus Group Discussion
7. Case studies
8. Chapter overview

Through these discussions, this chapter tries to understand the underlying reason behind women's exclusion to inheritance and property right and the factors that act as the barriers which maintain the gendered practice and what can be done to address the issue at hand.

6.1 Experiences of discrimination

Literally, discrimination refers to the unfair treatment of an individual on the grounds of race, age, sex or other identity characteristics. It includes the denial of equal rights, opportunities, and fair treatment for all individuals, and the United Nations committee on economic, social and cultural rights (CESCR) has defined discrimination as “any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference which is based on any ground, which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by all persons, on an equal footing, of all rights and freedoms” (UN. CESCR, 2009). Gender inequality is a form of discrimination in this, where women are restricted from certain rights and privileges as compared to men in a society.

Any society which is patriarchal in nature is no exception when it comes to disparities of rights between men and women. This inequality is rooted in the traditional practices which establish hierarchical relationships between men and women, granting different rights and privileges in certain practices such as

the inheritance rights, which hinder their ability to acquire and inherit immovable property like land (Deere & Doss, 2006). This discrimination in property rights is deeply rooted in the cultural and traditional practices of the society, and women's exclusion from such rights is often justified as cultural practice rather than discriminatory. Such practices affect and undermine women's economic stability, autonomy and social standing, reinforcing their subordinate position in their family and society. Within this context, emphasis was laid on exploring whether the respondents have experienced or encountered deprivation from inheriting or obtaining their lawful right to property.

The data showed that only one respondent (0.5%) from a developed village was deprived of her right to property, in contrast to the overwhelming majority of 199 respondents (99.5%) who stated that they did not face any kind of deprivation. A closer look at the sole respondent's case (Respondent 6 from Case Study 1) revealed that the discrimination was about her claim to her parents' acquired property, not ancestral property. This distinction brings emphasis to an important feature in the inheritance system of the Ao Nagas between ancestral and acquired properties, because traditional practice excludes women from inheriting ancestral properties but gives them equal rights to the parents' acquired properties. Disputes may arise in the exclusion of women in acquired properties, but such issues do not arise in ancestral properties, as women do not have any claim to begin with. Consequently, the data highlights that discrimination occurred exclusively in the context of acquired properties, while ancestral properties, which are governed by customary practices, continue to exclude women from inheritance rights, but women themselves do not regard it as discrimination or exclusion.

Key informant 17 opined that:

In reality in our practice, women are not deprived of land. Of course, they are not given the right to own ancestral property but rather given the privilege to utilise it when the need arises.

Our practices and ancestors have never forsaken them. They were always looked after and given the privilege to stay or farm till they were able to do so, just not the right to pass it over to their offspring. It is not only about land inheritance, but there is a cultural norm which was practical.

However, even though the respondents did not experience the deprivation or denial to property themselves, they narrated certain instances where they had come across their female acquaintances being denied the right to property. The following analysis examines the prevalence of such cases.

Table 6.1 Instances of respondent's acquaintances suffering such deprivation

Acquaintances being deprived of property ownership	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency/ (%)
Yes	7	4	11 (5.5%)
No	79	86	165 (82.5%)
No Idea	14	10	24 (12%)
Total	100	100	200 (100%)

From the data, only 11 respondents (5.5%) were aware of their acquaintances who were denied the rights to property, with respondents from developed villages more vocal than their underdeveloped counterparts. The respondents emphasised that the issues involved were about denial of rights in acquired properties rather than ancestral properties. Land in Ao society is closely tied to their clan and cultural identity, where outsiders are not allowed to own property, especially if they are from another state or even from another village within the same tribe. An outsider, or more precisely a non-clan member, coming and owning land is considered as a threat to the communal identity, where the land would be lost to outsiders, and it becomes a reason and justification for denying women inheritance even in acquired properties, particularly when they marry outside the tribe. This can be seen in the instance

where Respondent 78 (developed village) talked about her family acquaintance:

“A woman from our village married someone from another state, and she stays with her husband in the city. Her parents had acquired properties, and she was supposed to get her share, but the family clan members did not agree because her offspring, who would technically be an outsider through their father, would one day come and have ownership of the land. So, they instead bought that land and gave the amount to the woman.”

Respondent 53 (developed village) further illustrating the complexities of the traditional practices mentioned that people take advantage of the tradition and interpret the practice to suit their needs. She recalled the incident of her senior:

“It is almost 10 years now. It happened to my college senior. Her parents built a house on the property which they had acquired, and it was supposed to go to their daughters. But after their father passed away, their uncles took it away both the land and the house on it stating that land and buildings cannot be inherited by women. One thing was that their mother was from another tribe, but that does not become a valid reason.”

A similar instance was shared by Respondent 40 (developed village), highlighting how widows with no male offspring face the exclusion:

“A husband and wife had acquired property, but they did not have a son. The husband’s family took away the property, even to the extent of chasing out the wife from the property that she had acquired with her husband. I feel greed plays a role in it and is strongly against that. If it was ancestral property, it is understandable, but even in an acquired property women are not safe from discrimination.”

While interviewing Respondent 56 (developed village), a question was raised as to why instances occur where acquired properties given to daughters are taken away after the parents pass away, and her husband replied:

“In our cultural practice there is no rights for the daughters, and we have been practising that, and people often do not differentiate between ancestral and acquired properties and go according to the tradition. That is why instances arise where acquired properties are or not given or taken away from daughters.”

He also added:

“Even if I gave an acquired property to my daughters, in case they marry someone outside from the tribe, then it should come back to my kin and clan once my daughter and her husband pass away. Even though they might have their own son, they will still be an outsider clan.”

The response from Key Informant 7 helps us to understand it more:

“Such instances occur because we do not have any written laws. If our practice was a written law based on that, people would practise and restrain themselves. But since we have no written law, and from the beginning only men inherited land, some base the practice on that tradition alone and deny the rights to women or take away their properties.”

Similarly, Key Informant 9 explained that:

“When such incidents occur, male folks often say whether it is acquired or inherited, land and buildings never belong to women. That force is too big for women to counter.”

Key Informant 18 further highlighted that:

“Men, based on the sobaliba and emphasising the norms and practices followed, deny women the rights to acquire properties. It is also because of a lack of awareness, and people are still not clear or able to differentiate between acquired and ancestral property.”

Meanwhile, the larger majority of 165 respondents (82.5%) reported that they have not heard of or come across such instances of deprivation among their acquaintances. They responded that since women do not have any rights to begin with, such an issue does not arise. Moreover, cultural norms dictate the inheritance, which cannot be contested, and people in the society have internalised it as the norm. Respondent 96 (underdeveloped village) sharing her perception narrated:

“I believe it does not happen much in our society. This has always been our practice. Women do not inherit, so how can there be deprivation if it is not given anyway?”

Respondent 3 (developed village) also shared the same sentiment:

“For the first time in my life I hear a question like this being asked by you. I know that we have our own inheritance practices, and no one questions it. I don’t find any scope to think about so called women being denied land because we don’t have any right to begin with.”

Respondent 109 (underdeveloped village) also shared her thought on the question:

“I have two brothers, and my father has his share in the clan land. But I have never asked for a part of that land since it is ancestral clan land. I know I am a woman and have no right in that, which is why I do not go around grabbing or asking for share in that land. However, they too cannot take advantage of the situations or tradition and take away the land I have

acquired myself since it does not concern then even though I am a woman and even if it is given to my daughters. There should be clear distinction on acquired and ancestral properties, and let the prevailing practice be as it is since it is in the best interest for all.”

While the remaining 24 respondents (12%) stated that they were not aware of such issues nor have they come across any such incidence. Respondent 137 (developed village) mentioned:

“We already know that we do not have a share, and if someone shares that a woman was denied land, I would not know what to say. It is just how it is.”

Respondent 135 (underdeveloped village) stressed that there are other more pressing issues besides being denied inheritance rights which women don't even have the right to. She stated:

“Inheritance issues do not come up that much. It is not something we see as a problem. With education and employment, women can do their own things now.”

Although only one respondent from a developed village faced the issue of being denied the right to property, the respondents themselves have female acquaintances who were deprived of acquired property rights, and even though there are differences between developed and underdeveloped villages, the cases of daughters being denied ancestral properties do not arise nor are an issue, but rather the denial of acquired property rights based on cultural justification is a prevalent reality; while not widespread or common, it exists in Ao society.

Going forward, the study focuses on examining how gender bias operates within the inheritance system and excludes women from accessing or inheriting property in Ao society.

6.2 Gender Bias in Property Rights

Gender bias is the behaviour that favours one gender over another. It often manifests as the preferential treatment of one gender over others (Rothchild, 2007) shaped by sociocultural norms (Hamberg, 2008). When it comes to property inheritance, gender bias manifests through cultural mechanisms such as patriarchy, which deny women equal inheritance rights (Snood, 2023), especially in tribal societies like the Ao community. In Ao society, where land is communally owned, the gender of a woman greatly discriminates against her, as only male members of the clan can inherit and own the property, leaving women with no rights to land, resulting in gender bias in property ownership and its inheritance.

Under this heading, the perspectives of the respondents on whether their gender becomes an issue and a barrier to their inheritance rights are examined, and the first analysis focuses on exploring the perspective on whether Ao women feel that they are often barred from exercising their rights to property simply because they are women. This is done to understand the experiences and contextualise how gender norms shape the inheritance practice in Ao society.

Table 6.2 Barred from rights to land because they are women

Barred from rights to land	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency / (%)
Yes	70	76	146 (73%)
No	26	19	45 (22.5%)
No Idea	4	5	9 (4.5%)
Total	100	100	200 (100%)

A significant 146 respondents (73%) felt that they are denied the rights to property simply because they are women, with an almost equal representation of respondents from both developed and underdeveloped villages. This high percentage of respondents who recognised gender-based denial of rights indicates that societal norms and traditional practices hinder women's property

rights and are seen in both developed and underdeveloped villages, demonstrating that despite socio-economic differences, gender norms and traditions prevail and determine the inheritance practices.

As Respondent 70 (developed village) stated:

“Ao society is patriarchal in nature, and males and females are treated differently even though no one acknowledges it. But from our daily practices we can definitely notice the differences. Women do not bring anything into the marriage and leave their clan and marry into the husband’s clan. By default, our gender we do not get the properties.”

This internalised gender norm was shared by women from underdeveloped villages. Respondent 187 added:

“In a patriarchal society our gender decides our privileges, and society says that women do not have the right and it usually ends there.”

While Respondent 89 (underdeveloped village) mentioned:

“It is because of our gender that I believe we are on the receiving end. The term Anüng nuza generally defines our status and there is the saying Tetsür ji yimli mali -women do not have any rights.”

With regard to the perspectives above, Key Informant 12 observed that:

“It only makes sense that women see what is happening in the rest of the world where human rights and individual rights are present. So, when all of this exposure, awareness, and consciousness is present and when exposed to education and what is happening in the global scenario, I believe it is only natural that women begin to question their ascribed status, privileges, and limitations.”

Yet, in contrast, 45 respondents (22.5%) argued that the rights in the inheritance practice of Ao society do not depend on their gender alone. While it certainly plays a role, there are other factors which contribute to women's lack of access to property and inheritance rights. This can be seen from the narratives obtained from-

Respondent 101 (underdeveloped village) reflected on the conversation she had with her father:

“Ner chir saka senmang magustsuba ya kechiba? - I am your offspring too. Why is it that I am not given a share in the inheritance? To which my father replied: If I do that I would be going against our practice and even if I want to our customary practices does not allow it nor would the clan in general agree.”

Respondent 172 (underdeveloped village) further explained:

“It is not simply because we are women but because of the identity attached to our land. To safeguard that from happening, it is not given to women.”

Respondent 84 (developed village) reinforced this perspective, stating:

“It is believed land would go away with the woman after she marries. Not simply because we are women.”

Besides the contrasting perceptions, a small number of nine respondents (4.5%) expressed that they had no idea about the issue and highlighted that they have never thought before as to why or how their gender affected their rights or whether other factors play a role, and at the same time they also acknowledged that they have not considered why the practice is the way it is. This highlights that the practices are so internalised and have become normal that society or women themselves do not question the practice.

Respondent 60 (developed village) admitted:

“To be honest, I don’t really care. We see and know that land is always with men, and there is no alternative to that. I have accepted that without realising it and have never questioned why women are left out of it.”

Respondent 199 (underdeveloped village) also added:

“I do not even bother with why women are left out of the inheritance. Always assumed it to naturally be a part of our cultural practice.”

All this shows that in the inheritance practice of Ao society, gender plays a role, but it does not determine the inheritance rights alone, rather it is influenced by the intricate cultural beliefs and traditions. As such, structural gender inequality exists, and in the following analysis, the perspectives of the respondents on the effects that gender plays in their access to property and inheritance rights is explored to understand their perception of the cultural and societal norms that lead to the discrimination in property rights.

Table 6.3 Effects of gender on property ownership

Effects of gender on property ownership	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency/ (%)
Women do not enjoy equality in land and property rights	69	77	146 (73%)
Women own less than men solely or jointly	8	4	12 (6%)
Have fewer rights and own less property	11	6	17 (8.5%)
Smaller plots as against men	16	9	25 (12.5%)
Total	100	100	200 (100%)

Upon enquiring about the effects of their gender on property rights, the majority of 146 respondents (73%) stated that women do not enjoy the same level of rights or own property as men, and this view was slightly more prevalent in underdeveloped villages (77 respondents) as compared to developed villages (69 respondents). This perspective shows that women in Ao

society are aware that they do not have the same rights as their male counterparts because of the customary and traditional practices.

Respondent 37 (developed village) opined that:

“Women are secondary when it comes to the process of inheritance. We do not expect it not because we do not want it but because we were always told that women cannot have it.”

While respondent 124 (underdeveloped village) also noted:

“It belongs to men. There is always that thought or notion behind land.”

Another group of 12 respondents (6%) shared that most often, even if women own property, they are lesser in number, whether it is owned solely or jointly with their husbands. While 17 respondents (8.5%) also hold the view that women not only have fewer rights than men but also, as a result of it, own less property than men in total. This response relates to the fact that among the 200 female respondents sampled for the study, only 21 of them own property. Besides the sampled respondents, Ao Naga women in general own less property, whether solely or jointly, compared to men, and this highlights the gender disparity in property ownership. Agarwal et al. (2021) write that across nine Indian states, women account for only 11% of landowners, revealing the persistent gender norms influencing discrimination when it comes to property ownership.

Respondent 147 (developed village) stated:

“Besides not being allowed to inherit or own ancestral property, the traditional practices often influence our acquired property ownership as well. The traditional norms surrounding land is so patriarchal that even in acquired properties women own less than men and disputes often arise concerning its inheritance by women.”

The remaining 25 respondents (12.5%) opined that when women do own land, the plots they own are often smaller in size compared to the plots men own, indicating that even when women own property, their holdings are often marginal, reinforcing their secondary status compared to men. Respondent 53 (developed village) highlighted this:

“The family land which my parents bought in Mokokchung town was given to us along with my three brothers and one sister. However, my brothers had a bigger share by virtue of them being men.”

Similarly, Respondent 66 (developed village) also stated:

“We bought land in Dimapur for our son and daughter, and while buying one plot of land was bigger than the other. The bigger land went to the son as he was the male and the eldest as well.”

Interestingly, the effects of gender on the disparities in property ownership were more prevalent among respondents from developed villages, even though the difference is not much. This difference in perspectives is related to the disparity in property ownership status among the respondents from developed and underdeveloped villages, where it was seen that respondents from developed villages owned more property as compared to respondents from underdeveloped villages. As a result, respondents from developed villages were more in number when it comes to the perception of disproportionate ownership rights, shares, and smaller plots of allocation to women as compared to men.

In general, gender does play a significant role in the inheritance practice of Ao society, with a biased preference for men. The expected norms create a disadvantage, placing women in the domestic sphere, away from participating in decision-making and matters related to land. However, key informant 4 emphasised that it is not because of gender alone and stated that:

“It is the kind of social system Aos have, whereby land is connected to clan and kinship structures. If we decide to give away ancestral land to women, it will create chaos. Our society and cultural practice will no longer have that uniqueness. It has to stay in the village with the clan. Yes, in a way we can say that they are barriers but not in a negative sense. It is just a way of maintaining our culture.”

As such, in the following heading, besides gender playing a role, the specific barriers to women’s access to property and inheritance rights are examined and discussed.

6.3 Accessibility Barriers

A number of studies conducted have suggested that strengthening women’s rights to land increases their bargaining power within the family (Datta, 2006), fosters a sense of security and confidence (Bhatla, Chakraborty, & Duvvury, 2006), elevates their social status (Deininger, Goyal, & Nagarajan, 2010), ensures better education, health, and nutrition for their children (Menon et al., 2014), and aids in the reduction of gender-based violence (Agarwal, 1997), among other positive outcomes. While it is acknowledged that women’s property ownership can have significant positive effects, achieving such rights is often difficult, as women face several barriers in accessing, owning and inheriting property. While gender constitutes a barrier, social-cultural, legal and economic barriers also play a prominent role in determining their rights.

As seen from the data, only 21 out of 200 female respondents owned property, highlighting that women in Ao society face a number of barriers to access, own, control and inherit property. To understand the barriers, an attempt has been made to identify the gender-specific barriers classified into socio-cultural, legal and psychological barriers faced by women in Ao society.

Socio-cultural and traditional barriers to property rights relate to the norms, customs, and practices that prevent individuals or groups from owning,

inheriting, or accessing land and other assets. These practices rooted in societal structures determine gender roles and perpetuate exclusionary behaviours such as denying women the right to property (Johnsson & Tualima, 2017). As such, emphasis is laid on examining the respondent's views on whether socio-cultural traditional and customary practices serve as barriers to their property rights.

An overwhelming majority of 182 female respondents (91%) believed that the socio-cultural traditions and customary practices act as significant barriers to securing their property rights. They acknowledged that customs and traditional practices deeply-rooted in societal norms play a restrictive role prioritising male inheritance over female inheritance across Ao society, highlighting the dominant role that traditions play in the society irrespective of regional or socio-economic differences among the respondents.

Having established the dominant view that socio-cultural traditions and practices serve as the primary barrier to women's property and inheritance rights in Ao society, the following analysis focuses on the reasons behind the exclusion and examines the respondents' perspectives on why women are denied the rights to property.

Table 6.4 Socio-cultural barriers to property inheritance

Socio-cultural barriers to property inheritance	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency / (%)
Not entitled to own property	22	34	56 (28%)
Symbolic identity of land	27	19	46 (23%)
Patrilocal residence system	18	11	29 (14.5%)
Political system	9	7	12 (6%)
All of the above	21	18	39 (19.5%)
No Idea	7	11	18 (9%)
Total	100	100	200 (100%)

When it comes to the perspective on socio-cultural factors as barriers to property inheritance, the majority of 56 respondents (28%) stated that women are simply not entitled to own property, with more respondents from underdeveloped villages (34) sharing this perspective. This highlights that traditional practices and societal norms consider women as ineligible and exclude or restrict them from property ownership and inheritance in Ao society.

Key informant 10 commented:

“Our traditions and customs are considered sacred. It has an element of sacredness to it. So, tampering with it is seen as quite taboo, and if the customary norms say that women are not entitled to inherit property, it ends with that without any exception.”

Another group of 46 respondents (23%) opined that the symbolic value attached to land acts as a barrier to women's property rights. Land in Ao society is viewed not just as an economic asset but rather as a symbol of lineage and clan identity that is always traced through the male lineage, reinforcing patriarchal norms within the society. Also, respondents from developed villages shared this opinion more indicting a greater awareness of cultural symbolism attached with land among the respondents.

Key Informant 12 stated:

“Land is identity for us Nagas, and it is a matter of identity in the sense that our tradition and culture are taken as matters of identity for us.”

Key Informant 20 further commented:

“For us Aos, who we are is determined by land. Today feminists, or people basing their opinions on gender equality, may say women are discriminated against and should have equal rights. But we should understand why the practice is that way. Why the land was only with men and why women cannot inherit the land. The cultural value should be taken into consideration.”

Besides the symbolic value attached to land, 29 respondents (14.5%) stated a specific socio-cultural barrier rooted in the marriage system, which is the fear that granting women inheritance rights would lead to the clan land being lost when they relocate to the husband's home after marriage. This reinforces the notion that land must always remain within the clan and the men to protect and safeguard it. The marriage and kinship structure, plus the patriarchal nature of Ao society, thus becomes a barrier to women's rights, and this perspective was also shared more by respondents from developed villages as compared to underdeveloped villages.

Respondent 120 (underdeveloped village) stated:

“Of course, because our culture is rooted in patriarchy and patrilineality. Many perceive allocating inheritance to women as something that has been thrown away because in a patrilineal society, a woman becomes a part of her husband's family after her marriage.”

Another presumption is that women in Ao society are barred from property inheritance because of the prevailing political system, which was shared by 12 respondents (6%). The council system, governance structure and decision-making are all male-centric, and only with land ownership and clan membership can one participate in the governance structure of Ao society.

Key Informant 12 explained further on this. She noted that:

“Nagas and Aos in general identify with the customary practices, with the tradition that has been carried down. We also have to remember that the Nagas are a struggling group of tribal people with an unfinished political solution. So, within that political milieu, people in general do not want to tamper with the customary laws and create further internal struggle. Because it is seen as a threat to the identity.”

Key informant 13 also mentioned that:

“When we talk about the land, it is very closely linked with the Putu Menden. The Putu Menden is Tebur Yimli (privilege of men), and we don’t have any right to participate in it. Therefore, land is very closely linked with Putu Menden and hierarchy in our society. If something is shaken up in the political sphere and matters related to land, it will adversely impact the tradition and our society.”

A notable 39 respondents (19.5%), with 21 from developed and 18 from underdeveloped villages, opined that the combined factors of women not being entitled to inherit or own property, the symbolic identity of land, patrilocal residence and the political system of Ao society all interact and come together to exclude women from property ownership and its inheritance rights in Ao society. While respondents from underdeveloped villages focused more on specific reasons, respondents from developed villages highlighted that the different socio-cultural practices and traditions come together to exclude women from inheriting property in Ao society.

Here, Key Informant 9 stressed that:

“It is not because of one specific factor alone but a combination and interplay of various factors. But more specifically, because of women’s gender within the clan system and patriarchy, which

at the end influences the descent, patrilocal residence and even the political system.”

The remaining 18 respondents (9%) expressed uncertainty about whether traditions and customs become a barrier or not. This uncertainty is because of many reasons, but it is mainly due to women not questioning and accepting the norm and exclusion as simply ‘the way things are’.

The prevalence of these socio-cultural traditions becomes a persistent barrier to women’s land ownership, restricting women’s ability to inherit, own, or control property despite legal provisions advocating gender equality. While socio-cultural norms dictate exclusionary practices and expectations, patriarchy sustains them by legitimising and reinforcing it. Patriarchy operates through a number of institutional structures, including economic dependence, cultural norms, and legal exclusions, all of which systematically restrict women’s property rights. Accordingly, the perspectives of the respondents on whether patriarchy dominates the social norms of society were explored.

Table 6.5 Patriarchy-dominated social norms

Patriarchy and dominance	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency / (%)
Yes	77	70	147 (73.5%)
No	4	3	7 (3.5%)
No Idea	19	27	46 (23%)
Total	100	100	200 (100%)

The data provides a compelling view of the respondent’s perspective on the dominance of patriarchy in the social norms of Ao society. A distinct majority of 147 respondents (73.5%) agreed that patriarchal structure dominates their society, with similar views shared between respondents from developed and underdeveloped villages, highlighting that patriarchal structure is prevalent across all regions and places in Ao society.

Respondent 56 (developed village) described this by stating:

“Starting from the household, the workings of the clan, the village council system and even the church, every sphere is dominated by men in our society. It has always been the men who lead, and this has always been our Ao way of life.”

While Respondent 77 (developed village) shared a more critical view:

“Unfortunately, patriarchal norms in our society have placed women as mere helpers to men, confined to the role of childbearing and looking after the family and in a secondary position compared to men in all aspects. We have been kept in that place even today.”

Similar concern was shared by Respondent 105 (underdeveloped village), highlighting the prevalence of patriarchal structures despite regional differences:

“Men hold the dominant power in all walks of life, and women are largely excluded from it. To say that patriarchy does not shape or influence our practice would be like ignoring the very thing that defines our society.”

Key Informant 2 explains why patriarchy dominates the social norms in Ao society:

“From the beginning, women were not even allowed to attend the Senso Mungdang. It is a place where all the important decision-making was done and everything that concerns the village was discussed there. When we talk about a village, it is about both male and female and children, but girls were not allowed to attend that. Women have been excluded that way from the beginning, and as such, patriarchy, or men, dominates the social norms.”

In contrast, only seven respondents (3.5%) disagreed, highlighting how normalised the practice is and that women do not consider it dominating nor question its prevalence in society. For instance, Respondent 64 (developed village) clarified this, stating:

“I would not say dominating. That is a big word. It is just how things are practised in our society. Men have their roles and duties; women have their own roles. This creates a balance which our society has been built on. Not one gender dominating or ruling the other.”

Respondent 196 (underdeveloped village) also emphasised tradition over power dynamics:

“We have grown up knowing that the status of men and women is very different, and it is taught not just by family but by our tradition as well. However, I have never considered it to be women being dominated by patriarchy. It is just how our society practises and does things.”

Meanwhile, 46 respondents (23%) stated that they have no idea whether patriarch dominates the social norms or not, reflecting the internalisation of the prevailing norms in the society. Respondent 77 (developed village) highlighted this:

“Is it so? I thought it was simply the way how things worked in our society. Never gave a thought beyond that.”

Respondent 88 (underdeveloped village) also shared:

“I have never considered it as dominating or suppressive. We follow the ways that has been taught to us and which we have noticed growing up where women do not have decision-making ability or other rights because of our traditional gender roles and the political and social structure. Nothing much or less.”

The dominant view affirms that patriarchy has set different roles, rights and privileges for both men and women, shaping the family dynamics and the power structure in Ao society. Over time, this arrangement has become normalised and stays unchallenged. However, with the exposure to legal rights and awareness, individuals have started to question the unfair norms that have been going on and reflect on them even if one might not go against them.

When confronted with the constraints of a patriarchal structure which not only influences the societal expectations but directly influences and shapes the access to inheritance rights, women find it difficult in terms of their power and ability to pursue property claims. The respondents' perspectives on navigating this issue were also explored, which highlighted that the majority of them find it difficult to go against the patriarchal structure, depicting the internalisation and reluctance of going against the accepted practice.

This was highlighted by Respondent 40 (developed village), who said:

“Since our forefathers it has been the practice, and we have been socialised that way. So, questioning it feels like questioning our identity.”

Respondent 56 (developed village) justified the prevailing system, stating:

“As our forefathers have said, we don't know where the leaves are blown away. The same way we don't know where a woman will end up. A man takes a wife and by virtue of that becomes the dominant one. When society says that, what can we say? We are a part of that, and it is our identity and reality.”

Respondent 173 (underdeveloped village) also shared how naturally women in Ao society have accepted the practice and reflected:

“Before today I haven't thought much about women's inheritance and property. We are so used to the norms and haven't thought beyond why women are not given the rights. So,

when a woman fights for her right or goes against that norm, she will face severe backlash from society and a lifetime of regret. That burden is too heavy to carry, and it feels unnatural as well.”

This shows how patriarchy functions in Ao society, not just by structural exclusion but also by socialising women into accepting it as the norm, and even when women realise the disparities and the discrimination, they cannot do anything against it, as mentioned by Respondent 65 (developed village):

“I have never thought about it before, but now that you raised the question, I have realised how much we have accepted without questioning. But then again, how can we unlearn what has been handed down for generations?”

When confronted with that situation, Respondent 77 (developed village) noted:

“We willingly give the privilege to men, and the term they use to describe us is also accepted without contesting it. It is better to stay silent than be known as the arrogant and stupid women who went against the customs.”

Such acceptance highlights the collective internalisation of patriarchal norms among the women in Ao society, and Respondent 166 (underdeveloped village) mentioned:

“We realise that women have a secondary role in our society, and we acknowledge that without any grudges or grievances. Why? Because it is our customary practice. However, to challenge or go against it is something we cannot think of, and it is easier to just accept and live with it.”

While Respondent 169 (underdeveloped village) added:

“It would mean going against our practice, and men are very rigid and strongly stand on the sobaliba. How can I, a Anüing

nuza stand against that? It is something very difficult for us to proceed with, knowing that huge resistance and backlash would follow. This would create problems for us, and knowingly, we women do not do anything against that.”

Together, these narratives from the respondents point to the intersection of customs, identity and gender, with socialisation playing a role in bringing up the individuals in society in the accepted norm. However, awareness and realisation from individuals are slowly growing, but the collective consciousness of the internalised norms keeps individuals, especially women, from going against it, showing how deeply rooted patriarchy is in Ao society.

While socio-cultural traditions and patriarchal structure create significant barriers that limits women's access to property in Ao society, the legal structure and governance system of Ao society further exacerbates the situation. Even when constitutional and statutory laws advocate for gender equality in property rights, customary laws and male-dominated governance structures often undermine its enforcement, particularly within tribal and indigenous communities (Agarwal, 2002; Rao, 2011). In Ao society, despite the formal legal frameworks proclaiming equal rights for men and women, traditional practices and customary laws continue to take precedence, as upheld by Article 371(A) of the Indian Constitution, which safeguards the Naga customary traditions, especially in matters related to land and governance, reinforcing gendered exclusion despite constitutional guarantees.

A notable observation can be seen among the respondents, where 133 respondents (66.5%) acknowledge that customary law serves as a primary barrier to women's property rights in Ao society. Though not 100%, the shared perception of the respondents highlights the dominating force of customary law on property ownership and its inheritance rights despite the prevalence of formal legal frameworks of the Indian Constitution. This dual legal system creates a conflict, but the customary laws have stayed unchallenged, guiding the behaviour of the people and regulating social

conduct, thereby preserving the cultural identity of the community. Individuals also uphold and adhere to it as the legitimate norm, reinforcing its authority in the society.

As Respondent 148 (developed village) stated:

“Customary laws and practices guide and regulate our society. It is not a written law, but it has been handed down through the words of elders and what has always been done. That is the only law we know.”

While Respondent 104 (underdeveloped village) added that it has its roots in patriarchy:

“Ao society is deeply rooted in patriarchy and upholds customary law, which decides everything from who is eligible to inherit property to who can participate in the village council or speak in it.”

Respondent 17 (underdeveloped village) stated that even though it is discriminatory, people do not challenge it:

“Customary laws are unique to our culture and society. It is what we have grown up with, and we don’t think about changing the customs even if they might be unfair at times.”

Key informant 13 noted that:

“Everything springs out from customary laws and customs. It is the very stringent makeup of our customary laws which is not flexible. What was there in the forefathers’ time, it holds true even now, even with so much education and emancipation and legal reform. This still hasn’t changed, and it will continue to be the guiding force.”

Customary law is not just externally enforced but internalised and upheld from within by individuals, and society upholds it as the means through which social order prevails. It functions as a cultural and legal authority, upholding patriarchal structure and determining the rights and privileges of women in Ao society with a complex interplay of tradition and cultural identity that sustains its dominance. Going against it or standing for gender equality and demanding inheritance rights for women is countered not only by the customary law but also by the legitimacy of its demand in terms of the cultural context.

To understand the extent of gender bias in customary law and whether it becomes a barrier to women's access to and inheritance of properties in Ao society, the respondent's awareness and perception of the issue are explored.

Table 6.6 Gender bias in customary law

Gender bias in customary law	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency / (%)
Men-centric	72	61	133 (66.5%)
Not Men-centric	1	4	5 (2.5%)
No Idea	27	35	62 (31%)
Total	100	100	200 (100%)

Overall, the perception of gender bias in customary law is relatively high, with 133 respondents (66.5%), 72 from developed villages and 61 from underdeveloped villages, holding the opinion of it being gender biased and men centric. This shows the general awareness of the respondents of how gender roles are attached to the traditional governance structure and inheritance norms.

Respondent 172 (underdeveloped village) stated:

“In our Ao customary law land, leadership and decision-making, everything is in the hands of men. It had always favoured men, and women are left with the responsibilities of the household alone.”

Respondent 49 (developed village) pointed out the gendered origins mentioned:

“Customary laws were made by men for men. We respect and follow it, as it is the practice and has been handed down from our forefathers. But women always have a lower place in it than men.”

Respondent 20 (underdeveloped village) also shared the difference between son and daughter noted:

“A daughter is born in the house and is the same offspring as a son, but she can never inherit the land or house. We have seen and experienced it all, and that says everything.”

In contrast, a small number of only five respondents (2.5%) outrightly stated that there is no gender bias as such and that customary laws are not men-centric. This reinforces the notion that patriarchal structure is so deeply woven into the social fabric of Ao society that individuals do not consider it as biased but rather the prevalent and accepted norms of the cultural practice and tradition of the society.

Respondent 199 (underdeveloped village) shared:

“I don’t think about whether it is biased or not. Men and women have their own roles, and we are just following what has worked for our society, and it has become our custom.”

While Respondent 69 (developed village) opined that women are respected in other ways:

“Even if we do not inherit land, women have other forms of respect and responsibility. It is our tradition, and we don’t see it as unfair.”

However, at the same time, 62 respondents (31%) stated that they have no idea whether customary law is gender biased and also acknowledged that they have not thought about it in that way, with respondents from underdeveloped villages sharing this view more than those from developed villages. Male dominance within customary and traditional practices is so normalised that individuals in society consider it normal and do not think beyond that.

Respondent 156 (developed village) highlighted:

“No one has ever asked me if it is biased. Maybe it is. But I never gave it a thought. It is just how our community functions.”

Similarly, Respondent 167 (underdeveloped village) added:

“I never thought of it as men having more rights. We just accepted how things are because that is how things have been in our society.”

The responses show that patriarchal norms have been normalised to the extent that although women are mostly affected by them, they do not consider them as discriminatory but rather as a part of the cultural practice. Moreover, even though there is increasing awareness of gender bias in customary laws, the prevalence of traditional practices and its societal acceptance continue to act as barriers to challenging the inheritance norms, and it often goes unquestioned.

This structural exclusion is further reflected in the governance system, which is dominated by patriarchal structures shaped by cultural norms that reinforce gender norms limiting women’s involvement in the decision-making process (Firdaus et al., 2024). This power dynamic in the governance system results in the exclusion of women, making it difficult for them to challenge customary barriers or assert their rights (Goetz and Jenkins, 2005). The local governance structure in Ao society is also male-dominated, with the decision-making ability solely in the hands of men. The following data elaborates how gender bias operates within the local governance structure.

Table 6.7 Gender biases in local governance

Gender biases in local governance	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency / (%)
Limited power in decision-making	42	47	89 (44.5%)
Male leaders preferred traditionally	27	31	58 (29%)
Women's opinions disregarded	7	13	20 (10%)
All of the above	24	9	33 (16.5%)
Total	100	100	200 (100%)

Among the 200 respondents interviewed, not one single respondent reported that gender bias does not exist in local governance bodies. Instead, the majority of 89 respondents (44.5%) state that women face discrimination and have limited representation in decision-making ability bodies. In Ao society most of the important leadership positions are taken by men or reserved for men, which reinforces the secondary position of women in the society. Women's roles are delegated to household affairs, and the governance and decision-making aspects are in the hands of men, reinforcing the patriarchal nature.

In a similar line to that, 58 respondents (29%) opined that the governance and leadership roles in the society are reserved for men alone. This sentiment relates to the patriarchal nature as well, where men are seen as the protectors and guardians of the land and the identity that comes with it, as well as the authority to manage it.

Another group of 20 respondents (10%), seven from developed and 13 from underdeveloped villages, observed that not only are the roles reserved for men alone, but at the same time, even when women are present in the local governance bodies, their roles are often minimal, and even their voices are mostly disregarded and not taken seriously.

While the remaining 33 respondents (16.5%), with a higher number of respondents from developed villages (24) compared to underdeveloped villages (9), mentioned that all the factions stated above combine and interact

to form a practice and social norm, creating gender bias in local governance bodies.

The dual prevalence of customary laws and formal laws in Naga and Ao society in general creates a tension, where the constitutional provisions guarantee equality regardless of gender, but customary law prevails over it, particularly in relation to land, inheritance and governance. The next analysis focuses on the respondent's perspectives on the prevalence or dominance of cultural traditions and laws despite the existence of formal legal laws that stand for equality.

Table 6.8 Dominance of cultural traditions over formal legal laws

Cultural traditions supersede formal laws	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency / (%)
Yes	43	28	71 (35.5%)
No	Nil	Nil	Nil
No Idea	57	72	129 (64.5%)
Total	100	100	200 (100%)

The majority of the 129 respondents (64.5%) stated that they are not aware of or have any knowledge about formal legal laws and hence stated that they have no idea whether cultural barriers are more potent or dominant than formal legal laws. The majority of respondents especially from underdeveloped villages are mostly uncertain about formal legal laws, stemming as a result of limited access to legal knowledge and engagement with formal legal systems.

Respondent 11 (underdeveloped village) stated that for many, customary law is the only known system:

“I do not know anything about what the law says. I only know of what we have been practising, what our parents and elders have always done and what they have taught and brought us up with.”

This lack of legal awareness even extends to the respondents from developed villages, as shared by Respondent 67:

“As you have explained to me, I didn’t know we had legal rights through the constitution. We were not aware of it, mostly because we believed and assumed that only men have that right because it has been that way. We have accepted that assumption and followed it.”

While Respondent 86 (underdeveloped village) sharing her experience stated:

“What will an old woman like me who only studied till primary schooling, know about legal laws? Never even though that legal laws are there. Also, we live in villages where such things do not concern us. We have our own ways, and we live by that.”

And Respondent 11 (underdeveloped village) simply said:

“What is formal law? Do we have the right in that?”

Moreover, Respondent 19 (underdeveloped village) stated:

“We are not aware of any rights besides customary law and the traditions followed. But I guess the younger generation, through their education, would have more ideas.”

On the other hand, 71 respondents (35.5%) believe that cultural barriers dominate over formal and legal laws, with more respondents from developed villages holding this perspective. This points to an increased awareness of legal awareness among these respondents, especially in developed villages. They are aware that traditional practices and expectations prevail over legal laws that stand for equality.

Respondent 56 (developed village) pointed out that:

“The constitution/legislation is very different from the cultural/customary practices. We women can stand for rights wherever possible, be it in education, election, or administration. But when it comes to village matters such as yimten yimli or kidong li, women have no right in that. Besides inheritance and governance, all other privileges and rights are the same.”

Similarly, Respondent 151 (developed village) stated about cultural resistance:

“Legal laws may appear on paper, but do you think they can apply in our society? See, land and governance are what define our identity, and do you think we would acknowledge some foreign laws that were developed by others? Our customary practices would never acknowledge that.”

Even the educated respondents emphasised the dominance of cultural norms, as expressed by Respondent 171 (underdeveloped village):

“In my line of work as a district administrator, I had the opportunity to come across all these discussions, and it was also required of me to have general awareness of all the legal knowledge and activities. But then sharing from my experience in the face of the customary laws, all those become futile. We have our customary practices, and issues like land always have to be settled within the clans or the customary court.”

Key informant 14 also argued that:

“In legal perspective we say all men are equal. Equality before the law. So, in one way, women do feel that they are forsaken when that happens. But since it is our cultural practice, we accept what is there. Even if legal laws and constitutional guarantees exist, customary law negates them.”

Customary laws and cultural traditions continue to dominate matters related to property and its inheritance in Ao society despite formal legal provisions, which are rather ineffective, and even when individuals are aware of the legal frameworks, they disregard them due to the adherence to cultural norms and collective acceptance of customary practices. The majority of the women are also unaware of the formal and legal rights granted by the Indian constitution and customary laws as the only law that governs the inheritance norms within the society. Furthermore, a significant portion of the respondents remains oblivious to the dual prevalence of formal and customary laws, nor were they aware of the conflict between the two, where one formally promotes gender equality and the other impedes its implementation due to traditional inheritance norms and practices.

The structural barriers sustain Ao women's exclusion in inheritance practices, which is further compounded by legal and knowledge barriers. These barriers hinder women from exercising their rights to secure property due to conflicts between formal and customary laws as well as a lack of general understanding or access to legal information. Despite formal laws supporting gender equality, these obstacles still exist, often as a result of cultural resistance, discriminatory legal structures and low levels of legal awareness among women. They often remain unaware of their legal rights regarding inheritance and property, which hampers their ability to claim ownership or challenge discrimination.

In order to understand the extent of legal awareness, the following analysis explores respondents' awareness of legal rights and their perception of existing laws governing property and inheritance.

Table 6.9 Women's Awareness of legal rights

Awareness of legal rights	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency / (%)
Yes	37	29	66 (33%)
No	19	12	31 (15.5%)
No idea/no need	44	59	103 (51.5%)
Total	100	100	200 (100%)

Awareness of legal rights plays a vital role, but only 66 respondents (33%) reported that they were aware of their legal rights. Even though the number is relatively low, it is still encouraging that some levels of respondents are aware of the legal rights across both developed and underdeveloped villages. The higher number of respondents from developed villages also shows the greater level of awareness through higher education and more exposure to legal knowledge. These respondents also expressed a clear understanding of the limitations imposed by Article 371 (A) over the constitutional rights.

Respondent 149 (developed village) highlighted this:

“I am aware that constitutional rights are there which give equal rights to all irrespective of gender. Yet I also know that because we have Article 371 (A), customary laws overrun the legal rights.”

Respondent 36 (developed village) also added:

“We have legal rights, I know. But that does not guarantee our inheritance right, which is instead governed by our customary laws, where only men have the rights to land and its inheritance.”

Respondent 168 (underdeveloped village) stated that she became aware after hearing someone speak about it:

“During women’s fellowship in our church, a lecturer from a government college spoke about how women have rights in the constitution. That conversation made me aware of the rights to equality. However, she also said that we are instead governed by our customary laws when it comes to land and governance, and that opened my eyes.”

On the other hand, 31 respondents (15.5%) state that they are not aware of the legal rights that women have in terms of property rights. This group of respondents stated that besides the customary laws governing the inheritance practice which they have seen and grown up with, they were of the opinion that there are no other legal rights and avenues that would give women the rights to property.

Respondent 64 (developed village) pointed out that:

“No one has ever mentioned women having land rights. Nor has anyone talked about other legal rights and all besides the customary laws. Land always goes to the sons, and that is our customary law. That is what we have always believed.”

Similarly, Respondent 86 (underdeveloped village) said:

“Everything I know about inheritance has been passed down from our elders and what I have seen around me. From there we see that there is no other law besides customary law. So, no one would be aware of our legal rights.”

Meanwhile, the remaining 103 respondents (51.5%) reported that they have no idea about the legal rights and stated that they are not aware whether other legal aspects were there for women or not and, as such, have not given any thoughts at all, as legal rights are not a part of everyday conversation.

Respondent 77 (developed village) shared:

“We see such things on the TV and all, like the Indian and CID. But we don’t discuss such issues. We watch it and then feel some emotion of either being shocked, amazed or wondering, but nothing beyond that. Never assumed or thought that it could be applicable in our society.”

Respondent 95 (underdeveloped village) also added:

“During our usual gatherings we mostly talk about family, friends or what is happening in our village. Not about rights or laws. It is not even a topic that comes up.”

Respondent 3 (developed village) gave an interesting comment, saying:

“We are already legally empowered or aware of our rights, but it won’t do much. No amount of legal empowerment would help because at the end we are governed by our customary laws, and women cannot access that legal empowerment.”

This general lack of awareness among the respondents highlights a critical gap between legal provisions and social reality. While formal law exists, it often remains ineffective due to the prevalence of customary laws in tribal communities and their strong hold on daily life and practices rooted in traditional customs and beliefs. Women neither question the practice nor seek alternative ways through the legal system as customary practices continue to overshadow the legal constitutional rights.

The limited awareness of legal rights also influences the process of writing wills, which is a way through which women can acquire property through their parents’ will. However, despite wills serving as a legal way to secure property, it has been seen that only three respondents from the study acquired property through a will. This led to the question of whether women are generally aware of writing wills or not, and the following analysis examines this issue.

Table 6.10 Awareness on writing wills

Awareness on writing wills	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency / (%)
Yes	17	9	26 (33%)
No	74	86	160 (80%)
No Idea/ No need	9	5	14 (7%)
Total	100	100	200 (100%)

As seen from the table, only 26 respondents (33%) were aware of or understood the concept of writing a will, which would give their daughters or anyone in their will the right to inherit acquired properties. This is particularly important when compared to the previous analysis, where 66 respondents were aware of legal rights, but the drastic decrease to only 26 respondents in the context of writing wills highlights a very limited and superficial understanding of legal provisions in practice, such as writing wills.

Respondent 5 (developed village), who owns an acquired property, stated that she became aware after an informal interaction:

“Right after my marriage, a person I am close to said, there are only daughters in your family; if something happens to you suddenly, what would happen to it?. Prepare affidavits for the properties, or else be snatched away. That kept me thinking of what if or something which might not even happen, but the thought was there.”

Respondent 107 (underdeveloped village) perceived it as an urban or elite practice:

“I heard from my friend whose uncle in the city wrote a will for his daughter. But that is very rare here unless people have acquired properties. Most people don’t have acquired properties, and daughters cannot get anything. The need for it arises only for people who can acquire it.”

On the other hand, the dominating majority of 160 respondents (80%) admitted that they are not aware about writing wills, and this view is consistent in both developed and underdeveloped villages, showing that legal illiteracy is not specific to socio-economic or geographical categories. It remains a persistent structural barrier prevalent in Ao society, relying mostly on customary practices where women are excluded from inheritance, rendering the practice of writing wills largely irrelevant or unknown to most.

During the fieldwork, when this question was asked many respondents replied with confusion, asking, ‘Aji Kechi? -what is that?’ emphasising that they were not aware of what wills are and highlights the disconnection from legal frameworks and dominance of cultural norms. However, when the concept was explained further, they understood the term, saying that they are aware of some people who write it down on paper so that they give their properties to their daughters. Even so, since most do not own any acquired properties, the need for such wills is rare, and its awareness is minimal.

The comment from Respondent 103 (underdeveloped village) highlights this perfectly:

“Aji Kechi? I have never heard of that word before. In our traditional practice everything related to land is with men and passes down to the sons. I thought there was nothing beyond that.”

Respondent 15 (underdeveloped village):

“I am sure that many women like me would not have been aware of it. Besides what we have been practising and following, many would assume that it is the only way since we are socialised and that we don’t have any right.”

The remaining 14 respondents (7%) responded that the need for writing wills does not arise, reflecting a perception that such legal tools like writing wills are irrelevant. This is influenced by the customary belief that property succession

and inheritance is a male-dominated process and natural rather than being guided by legal frameworks. Even in the case of acquired properties which can be legally inherited through a will, the practice remains irrelevant or even alien to the cultural norms of the society.

Respondent 33 (developed village) questioned its relevance:

“Why write a will when everyone knows that the property will go straight to the son? There is no alternative besides our customary practice.”

While Respondent 111 (underdeveloped village) remarked:

“None of us have that kind of property, and I always thought that only people from the cities or rich people with extra land make wills. Plus, in our tradition there is no place for it. Everything belongs to the clan and the men only.”

The analysis highlights that writing wills is not common, as the respondents opine that not many are in a place economically where they can obtain acquired property, thereby the need to writing wills becomes irrelevant or unnecessary. Moreover, the socio-economic profile of the study highlights that the majority of the respondents have high-school-level educational qualifications, and even though basic literacy exists, many are not aware of or have not received information or awareness on legal rights concerning property and inheritance. This limited awareness of legal rights and writing of wills among Ao women reflects the wider social reality that customary laws continue to dominate alternative legal frameworks despite their prevalence and constitutional guarantee.

Key informant 14 further clarified this:

“Since it has not been in our practice of women inheriting ancestral land, people assume the same even when it comes to acquired properties. So, it is relevant that people should have

legal knowledge so that wills and affidavits can be prepared beforehand to avoid such circumstances. Ancestral properties cannot be inherited or given, but through wills, daughters can legally inherit their parents' acquired properties."

However, given the limited understanding of legal frameworks and awareness of writing wills, the following analysis explores whether the respondents have received any information, awareness or training related to legal rights. This will help determine whether the absence and limited awareness are a result of it or not.

Table 6.11 Campaign on legal rights by women's organisations

Women's organisations creating awareness on legal rights	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency / (%)
Yes	28	19	47 (23.5%)
No	58	71	129 (64.5%)
No Idea	14	10	24 (12%)
Total	100	100	200 (100%)

Only 47 respondents (23.5%) stated that they have received information or awareness related to legal rights from the women's organisations, highlighting that a very small number of respondents had the opportunity or came across such events to learn their legal rights. Moreover, respondents in developed villages (28) were more compared to underdeveloped villages (19), indicating that even among the ones who have had such awareness, the opportunities and participation were more in developed villages.

The larger majority of 129 respondents (64.5%) reported that they have not received such awareness. Even though the respondents in underdeveloped villages are higher, the prevalence of a large number of respondents irrespective of the socio-economic differences highlights the pervasive nature of customary laws and their rigid control over inheritance practices, which do not give any space for interference, nor does the need arise for such legal

awareness, as it becomes irrelevant when it is widely known, accepted and practised that only men have the rights to it.

The remaining 24 respondents (12%) acknowledged that they were not even aware whether such awareness of legal rights was held or organised or not.

Besides the socio-cultural and legal barriers that are often visibly recognised as barriers to women's access to property, psychological barriers represent a subtle yet significant obstacle. These barriers refer to the internalised beliefs and fears that obstruct women from asserting or claiming their rights even when one is legally empowered to do so. Kabeer (1999) notes that accessing rights involves more than just possessing the legal rights but also requires the ability to consider oneself as deserving of making claims, even when such claims challenge the societal norms. But in patriarchal societies, when one does not have the right according to the traditional norms, there is a fear of backlash, doubt and guilt over challenging these norms (Agarwal, 2003). Such psychological barriers stem from deeply rooted gender roles, internalised beliefs, traditional customs and limited legal knowledge (Verma & Narwal, 2024).

The most common psychological barrier is fear. Women often do not claim and assert their share of property because of the fear of social consequences, family conflicts, or the risk of cultural condemnation and exclusion. Patriarchy further exacerbates this situation, keeping women from questioning and challenging the traditional inheritance practices. The following analysis explores whether the respondents experience such fears, thereby becoming a barrier to accessing and inheriting property.

Table 6.12 Fear as a barrier to women's land ownership

Fear as a barrier to women's land ownership	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency / (%)
Yes	71	62	133 (66.5%)
No	11	8	19 (9.5%)
No Idea	18	30	48 (24%)
Total	100	100	200 (100%)

The majority of 133 respondents (66.5%) acknowledged that they do not stand for their rights to ancestral properties because they are aware that women do not have rights to them and fear that going against the practice would result in strong opposition and negative repercussions. The stigma of being seen as disobedient or greedy and the conflict with clan members and men keep women in line within the expected norms of the patriarchal social structure even in the absence of explicit coercion. Also, the marginal difference in responses from developed (71) and underdeveloped (62) villages shows that development does not lessen the fear but rather increases the awareness of social norms.

Respondent 89 (underdeveloped village) highlights this internalisation clearly:

“As long as our beliefs are there, one would always be afraid to speak out against that, and from our forefathers we have understood and been taught that our status is different, and sobaliba also supports that inheritance practice. So, what can we say? Would not dare to go against that.”

Respondent 100 (underdeveloped village) mentioned the awareness of sanctions:

“Even a man cannot give ancestral/clan lands to his daughters even if he wants to because he is bound by the societal norms. Sanctions are heavily imposed on individuals who go against it. So, fear does keep one in line.”

This sentiment is also shared by Respondent 82 (developed village):

“Ozüng ta aser. Ozüng agi aitsür. Ozüng ali tashibo menokdaktettsü. There is a law or norm, and such societal norms and customary law judge when one goes against it. So as long as it is there, one cannot stand against it.”

Rooted in personal insecurity and fear, Respondent 110 (underdeveloped village) said:

“We Aos are deeply rooted in our tradition and are always conscious of the thoughts that others/society would have or would be ashamed to go against the cultural practices.”

Similarly, Respondent 35 (developed village) also noted:

“If a woman dares to go against the practices, then she would be labelled as a rule breaker in the society and be looked down upon as someone who does not respect the customary traditional practices and a person after wealth. She probably would not want that.”

While Respondent 45 (developed village), basing it on moral grounds, added:

“We will live on the land, build our house on it and be buried on the land when we die. But to fight and commit sins over land is scary to me. So, for me, I don’t give much importance to land.”

Key Informant 13 emphasised how fear acts as a barrier:

“Women would rather not talk about the clan land. If it is clan land, we do not mind if women stay away from it. Because the customary laws and practices that have been framed are very intricate and have blended with the structure of the entire society, uprooting it will be difficult. It has not been our practice, and it is deeply fixed in the matrix of society, and

loosening it implies the entire structure of society may tremble. No women would risk starting that issue and face the backlash and the consequence as a result of it.”

In contrast, 19 respondents (9.5%) rejected the notion that fear of going against the practices acts as a barrier to women’s land ownership. Instead, this group of respondents opined that the inheritance norms and practices are so deeply rooted and normalised that people do not even think of going against the practice and have accepted it as it is and that the need to go against it does not arise.

Respondent 176 (underdeveloped village) expressed:

“It is not that we are afraid, but because we are aware and understand that it is not our custom, we refrain from doing otherwise. We just believe that we do not have the right and leave it as it is.”

Likewise, Respondent 56 (developed village) noted:

“Sobaliba I Aor tetsur senmang mali da ashir aser iba anema ji mebilemer aser menungra malir. -Our Sobaliba says that Ao women do not have inheritance rights. We do not feel anything against that, and we don’t go against it either.”

And Respondent 72 (developed village) added:

“I don’t think it would really be a barrier. If it is rightfully theirs, then why should a woman be afraid? The fact that she does not have the right to begin with is already known and does not go beyond that.”

Meanwhile, the remaining 48 respondents (24%) expressed uncertainty, which was particularly more prominent in underdeveloped villages (30 respondents). This group of respondents indicated that questioning the inheritance practice contradicts with the accepted norms, resulting in dishonour and social unrest.

At the same time, they also noted that there is reluctance in acknowledging the fear, highlighting an internal conflict between latent discomfort and normative conformity.

Respondent 94 (underdeveloped village) indicated that:

“Women are hesitant, as the tradition has been practised for long. We have grown up with that practice only.”

Respondent 58 (developed village) pointed out that it is of no use as:

“It is never logical. These things are never based on logic and reason. We have been practising it this way and would practise like that only. When people are not willing to rationalise it, fighting against it is useless.”

While Respondent 60 (developed village) mentioned:

“Nobody would think of going against the norms unless compelled by something.”

Thus, the fear of social consequences, whether explicit or internalised, remains a constant barrier to women's property and inheritance rights. In many cases, fear and normalisation have become indistinguishable, since Ao women do not see the denial of property as a violation but rather as something that is culturally appropriate. Because of this, changes in law or constitutional guarantee alone cannot change the inheritance norms that is internalised so deeply without also addressing the social, psychological, and cultural mechanisms that uphold and perpetuate the discriminatory norms.

Besides the fears, women often face numerous challenges when they attempt to claim their inheritance rights. Societal norms, family pressure and customary laws all discourage them from asserting ownership over property or standing up for their rights, which reinforce their exclusion. The following analysis examines the respondent's perception on whether they feel that women face greater challenges than males in exercising their rights.

Table 6.13 Women face more challenges in exercising their rights

Facing challenges in exercising their rights	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency / (%)
Yes	92	89	181 (90.5%)
No	5	4	9 (4.5%)
No Idea	3	7	10 (5%)
Total	100	100	200 (100%)

From the respondents, 181 of them (90.5%) believed that women face more challenges in exercising their rights as compared to men in Ao society when it comes to inheritance rights. This indicates the general awareness among the respondents of the different rights and privileges for men and women in Ao society, and the broader exclusion across developed and underdeveloped villages also highlights that irrespective of socio-economic privileges and development, societal norms like patriarchy and traditional cultural practices dominate the lives of people in Ao society. When faced against such norms and practices, women cannot go against them, nor can they stand for their rights, as it is not the practice.

As Respondent 23 (developed village) puts it:

“My brothers never had to ask for land. It is their birthright as a man. But for us daughters and girls, even if we are of the same blood and clan, we never have the rights to land. Forget about us speaking for our rights; people would say we are being disrespectful.”

Respondent 103 (underdeveloped village) mentioned that she doesn't know how it all started but stated that:

“Sobaliba arubaji tebur akhüm nung tetsür alir. In men's protection and care women thrived. A man is a pillar for women. They took matters in hand when there were wars and when the

need arose, and we women and children were under their care. In our practice men come first, and it has been practised that way.”

While Respondent 120 (underdeveloped village) added that it may be because:

“Our culture is rooted in patriarchy and patrilineality. Everything rests on that in our society, and that force is too big to counter.”

On the other hand, nine respondents (4.5%) disagreed, stating that whatever practices exist are relevant and that such an issue does not arise, while 10 respondents (5%) were not decisive as to whether that is the case or not. Respondents and women in general have internalised the norms and view their experience of exclusion as normal, so when encountered with questioning the accepted norm, they become indecisive and unsure of the situation.

Respondent 121 (underdeveloped village) admitted that:

“This is how things have always been done in our society as per the tradition. Men inherit, and women are cared for by the family and men. This is our cultural practice and our identity.”

Respondent 141 (developed village) further argued that:

“It is not a problem unless we make it one. Ours has been a patriarchal society since time immemorial, and for centuries, men have been considered to be the head of the family and various societal institutions. They are the breadwinner and realistically the heir to an existing property. This doesn’t necessarily mean that women are considered inferior; rather, it has more to do with passed-down traditions and acquired mindsets. It is how things are supposed to be in our society.”

The perspectives of the respondents emphasise that the awareness of gender disparities is widespread, and women understand that their exclusion is not

merely because of their gender but also because of the prevalence of customary practices and traditional norms and the internalisation of what is acceptable, respectable and normal for women in Ao society.

When women are discouraged from going against the norms and do not have the rights to property, they are often dependent on their husbands or male counterparts due to a lack of economic resources, which increases their vulnerability to violence and exploitation. The fear and threat of poverty and insecurity often trap women into remaining in abusive relationships, making them more susceptible to violence and coercion. This analysis explores whether women perceive this inevitably leads to vulnerability and traps them in abusive relationships.

Table 6.14 Increased vulnerability due to lack of property

Increased vulnerability due to lack of property	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency / (%)
Yes	56	50	106 (53%)
No	16	9	25 (12.5%)
No Idea	28	41	69 (34.5%)
Total	100	100	200 (100%)

The lack of property results in greater economic, social and emotional insecurity of rights, and the fear of going against the practices reinforces the vulnerability. As such, the majority of 106 respondents (53%) affirmed that this was the case, with similar responses from both developed and underdeveloped villages. The opinion of the respondents highlights the wider scholarly argument that property ownership leads to greater economic security, autonomy and social standing.

Respondent 87 (underdeveloped village) highlights this reality:

“When one does not have any backbone to lean on, automatically the feeling of secondary status does exist.

Respondent 141 (developed village) opined that it would be a symbol of social recognition:

“I would be lying if I said no. Property ownership would make us feel empowered. However, this empowerment wouldn’t be because of the fact that I now own a property, but because it was made possible for a woman to own something that was not originally considered the norm in the first place.”

Similarly, Respondent 185 (underdeveloped village) noted that it would give one a choice of freedom:

“The circumstances are different for all. A woman might not have any other option than to stay in an abusive relationship/marriage just to avoid a fate worse than that, and anything that can be of help would change that fate.”

However, not all respondents agreed that property ownership is essentially empowering. 25 respondents (12.5%) opined that property ownership does not guarantee security. They highlighted that property ownership alone does not empower or elevate women’s status in the family and society. The support from the family and their empowerment through education and employment helps mediate this issue. As such, respondents from developed villages shared this opinion more, indicating and emphasising the relevance of education, employment and self-empowerment rather than depending on property ownership alone.

Respondent 37 (developed village) implied:

“Honestly, owning property and inheritance is by no means a way of feeling secure. I would rather feel burdened to be owning a property which I did not earn myself.”

While Respondent 119 (underdeveloped village) expressed that:

“Owning property does not make us feel empowered. Being financially stable gives us the sense of empowerment and security, because land can be sold or bought anytime through financial capability, which can be achieved through employment.”

At the same time, a substantial number of 69 respondents (34.5%) were uncertain, with respondents from underdeveloped villages (41) sharing this opinion more compared to developed villages (28). The group of respondents highlighted that since they have never owned property, they were uncertain whether owning it would bring any difference in their lives or not.

Respondent 45 (developed village) acknowledged:

“I was given a piece of land; the feeling I think I would get/have would be a worldly feeling. I guess I would have that proud feeling, but since I have land, I have enough, I won’t feel that way.”

Respondent 150 (underdeveloped village) noted:

“No property, so I have no idea. But I would also like to mention that property ownership alone may not provide empowerment. Instead, in our society, where emphasis is laid on education and employment, it would rather empower us in different ways.”

Thus, while property ownership does provide some level of empowerment and improves the status of women, it does not guarantee full security. Rather, the emphasis is laid on education, employment and self-sufficiency as a subsequent result of it.

To break free from the vulnerabilities, securing property ownership and inheritance rights becomes crucial, as it is a means through which women can be empowered. However, at the same time, women’s claim to property rights is often dismissed and seen as a threat to the cultural practices and patriarchal

structure of a society. But only when women's claims are acknowledged, opening the doors to dialogues and reform. This raises an important question: should women demand a share in ancestral property? This analysis explores the respondent's perspectives on this question for equality.

Table 6.15 Legitimacy of women's demand for share in property

Legitimacy of women's demand for property	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency/ (%)
Yes	8	11	19 (9.5%)
No	63	61	124 (62%)
No Idea	26	31	57 (28.5%)
Total	100	100	200 (100%)

Even though the majority of the respondents in the previous analysis opined that there is increased vulnerability due to lack of property, only 19 respondents (9.5%) acknowledged that it is legitimate that women should demand a share in ancestral property. Many respondents opine that doing such a thing would result in backlash and would disrupt the societal practices but at the same time recognised the legitimacy of the women's demand for their rights.

Respondent 23 (developed village), emphasising equality, stated:

“Why not? Offspring of a family should be given the same platform for equal treatment. No one is less or more.”

While Respondent 141 (developed village) added:

“The need to demand a share has risen because of the lack of it. If we were talking about equity, we wouldn't have been demanding a share. But since women have been deprived of it for as long as they have existed, it is only legit that they are finally demanding what they equally deserve as humans.”

Besides equality, Respondent 183 (underdeveloped village), differentiating between ancestral and acquired property, mentioned:

“We do not demand the ancestral property but the same right in acquired property. As time goes on, we become more understanding. If we follow the old concept, even with acquired property, equality cannot be maintained. Creating hurtful sentiments in the family. Uniformity must be in equal share.”

And Respondent 185 (underdeveloped village) expressed that:

“If it is their right, why should they not? Pa dang temsüa lir bo agütsütsüla, -if she has the right, then why not?”

Meanwhile, the clear majority of 124 respondents do not consider women's demand for a share in ancestral property as legitimate. The opposition stems from both village types reflecting cultural consensus where women themselves view the inheritance of properties as a naturally male domain reinforced by patriarchal values. Property ownership might empower women in different ways, but the internalisation of the cultural practice creates a perception that going against the accepted practice would make one rebellious or even selfish, and as such, women themselves are protective of the cultural practice and do not recognise the legitimacy of women asking for a share in ancestral property. This also helps to explain why formal legal laws fail, as customary laws and practices prevail over them and women and society themselves uphold the practice.

Respondent 58 (developed village) claimed that:

“For me, I wouldn't. I would be disturbing the homogeneity of the land. Ultimately in the end that is also important. If there is some alternative way, then why not? But unless there is not, then we as women cannot. I don't think it is fair on our part too.”

Respondent 176 (underdeveloped village) mentioned the role of her gender and noted:

“How can we be women when we are considered as Aniing Nuza and demand or ask for a share in the clan land? That question or thought does not even arise.”

Respondent 105 (underdeveloped village) expressed fear of the burden it would bring, saying:

“Because when we ask what does not belong to us, we are destructing a practice which has been passed down from our forefathers. Through us we would be giving a burden to our families and our clan. I think we should not go out of the line and fight for that because that cannot be accepted in our society/tradition. So, I believe we cannot go out of the line and ask/demand a share in which we have no right since it has not been practical that way.”

Similarly, Respondent 109 (underdeveloped village) stated:

“I think that is not ok. A woman should know who is a woman. What is her right? To demand land as a woman, for me, since it is clan land, no girl/woman would come forward and demand that because we are already grounded and rooted through our tradition. But when it comes to fathers’ acquired properties, not the ancestral property, she has every right to ask for her share. This was given to me by my father. That itself becomes a right. And today/now even a woman can buy land. However, that is also not possible in a village, only in a town/urban area. And she has every right to give to whom she can.”

And Respondent 39 (developed village) reasoned why women should not:

“At one thought when we think about it, we feel, why should it not be given to us? We should ask for it too, but when we think clearly and deeply, I don’t feel it is right to ask/demand when our customary practice strongly denies or is against it. Since it

has been taught that it is not our norm, I won't bother to ask for it."

A notable 57 respondents (28.5%) were unsure, and it was slightly more in underdeveloped villages (31) as compared to developed villages (26). The respondents highlighted that inheriting property would give them certain opportunities, but at the same time, they were unsure whether they would go against the laid norm and face all the backlash and consequences to inherit land. They were in a dilemma where they would like to stand for their right, but at the same time, doing so and poking around would provoke social sanctions and bring discord and tensions within the family and society.

Respondent 41 (developed village) cautiously stated:

"Depends on the circumstance. We know that we cannot ask for clan land, so we would be hesitant to ask for that. However, if it is acquired property, then I would definitely stand for what is right."

Respondent 192 (underdeveloped village) shared a similar opinion:

"The question is, would a woman go and ask for a right which she knows she does not have any right to? Would her conscience allow that to go and fight for a right which belongs to men?"

Respondent 142 (developed village), on the other hand, questioned:

"Why are we even wasting time demanding generational property? Maybe women can do something else to be self-sufficient and independent. If it is acquired wealth, go ahead. Maybe file a case in one of the courts for what is rightfully yours."

Key Informant 13 mentioned that women should be assertive for their rights:

“Women’s mindset should change. I am not saying that women should cry for their liberation or go against the inheritance practice. But we should be assertive and know our rights, since women are not assertive in many cases because they don’t know their rights.”

These perspectives highlight an important aspect of Ao society: customary laws not only exclude women but are frequently enforced internally by women themselves because of socialisation, fear of social repercussions, and internalised beliefs regarding tradition and identity. Consequently, even formal legal rights become insufficient when they are not culturally accepted, and women experience moral dilemmas when trying to assert rights that are in direct conflict with deeply rooted social norms.

6.4 Inheritance Reforms

The evolution of property rights and inheritance laws has been deeply intertwined with societal norms and cultural beliefs. Traditionally, inheritance and ownership patterns were dictated by customary practices. However, shifts in social dynamics, legal frameworks, and the advocacy for gender equality have led to significant changes in perspectives. These reforms aim to challenge entrenched patriarchal values and promote gender equality. Research has shown that such reforms can have a profound impact on women’s lives. Deininger et al. (2010) observed that inheritance law reform had a positive effect, while Adam et al. (2011) noted that it leads to increased bargaining power, higher education, better health, and reduced discrimination and suicide. Furthermore, Goyal et al. (2013) and Roy (2015) found that these reforms improve female education, labour supply, autonomy, and more bargaining power.

Nonetheless, implementing the reforms is often accompanied by challenges. Anderson and Genicot (2015) pointed out that the reforms had unintended consequences, such as increasing property disputes within families, which have been linked to a higher rate of suicide and domestic violence. Despite

such constraints, it is essential to understand how norms around land and property ownership are evolving within the Ao Naga community and how these changes are perceived by the community members. The following analysis explores the perceptions of Ao Naga women regarding these changes and sheds light on whether property inheritance rights are necessary for women and whether there is a need to bring changes to the property inheritance system of Ao society.

Table 6.16. Property inheritance rights necessary for women

Property inheritance rights necessary for women	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency/ (%)
Yes	40	46	86 (43%)
No	53	39	92 (46%)
No Idea	7	15	22 (11%)
Total	100	100	200 (100%)

Property inheritance rights for women remain deeply contested, particularly in traditional patriarchal societies like the Ao Nagas. When enquired about the perspectives on whether property inheritance rights are necessary for women, 86 respondents (43%) believed that property inheritance rights are necessary for women, with slightly more in underdeveloped villages (46) compared to developed ones (40). This is because property can provide sustenance and status, bargaining abilities, determine economic independence and become essential when one is unemployed or when there are fewer opportunities. As such, respondents from underdeveloped villages recognise its value more as compared to developed villages with better facilities and opportunities.

Respondent 10 (developed village) started with:

“Why? Do you think it is not necessary for us women?”

While Respondent 51 (developed village) added:

“It is not like only men live in this world, and today girls do better in everything, be it education or jobs. So, girls having rights to land is important too.”

Similarly, Respondent 97 (underdeveloped village) stated:

“We live in a monetary world. When one does not have enough resources, everything becomes important. The process to distribute inheritance and properties has become more complicated than it was before.”

And Respondent 105 (underdeveloped village) mentioned:

“Whatever property it may be, it is equally important for all irrespective of gender. But a woman does not have much from the beginning, as it has been in our tradition. What men had stayed with them? When that happens, where one gender is excluded, some individuals are bound to arise who would ask and fight for an equal share.”

On this issue, Key Informant 2 rather commented that:

“The ancestral property rights are not necessary for women. A woman should not stand or go against a practice which perfectly suits our society. The ones who ask for the rights or question the practice of looking at equality alone do not understand the inheritance practice. They ask for the rights based on gender equality. But it has nothing to do with gender equality. We are misinterpreting the term “gender equality” to suit our needs.”

Key informant 17 further stated that:

“The world looks at our inheritance practice from a gender perspective or issue only. Mainly with the influence of education and feminism. Women and people mostly focus on it. They cannot maintain the identity but want the privilege at the same

time. What has been practised and handed down should be there, and understand the cultural practices as well. Men should also give the privilege, and women should also understand the question of why the practice started that way.”

In contrast, 92 respondents (46%) rejected the notion that property inheritance rights are necessary for women. The respondents highlighted that making any shift towards equitable inheritance rights is seen as unnecessary and disruptive, as the cultural practice is such that man dominates the economic and social spheres in Ao society, and a move towards challenging or standing against the norm is seen as a threat to the cultural identity, where gendered exclusion is not perceived as injustice but rather as a traditional practice.

Respondent 59 (developed village) stated:

“Since I am an educated, sufficient woman, I would instead work harder and get acquired properties instead of going against the held norms and asking for a share in ancestral property.”

Respondent 123 (underdeveloped village) argued:

“It has not been in our practice, and things are ok as they are, so I don’t really feel the need.”

Meanwhile, Respondent 142 (developed village) stated:

“Answered No, because it is just a cultural thing and we are a part of it. The world will change, and we cannot always keep up with its standards. But if our culture says a different story, then it is what it is. Maybe the origin is discriminatory, but it is a part of us. I stand for women’s rights to acquire property but not about generational ancestral property. The practice is what the norm says because it is not something that started randomly by anyone, but the older generations’ wisdom, and if the older

generations have decided to let the men have it, what are we even fighting for?”

The data also shows that 22 respondents (11%) expressed no clear opinion and were stuck between the two polar opposites. In a society where gendered exclusion and male inheritance are seen as the norm, the tendency to question does not arise, and when presented with the question, one remains indecisive as to whether women should have the right, which would mean going against the norm, or forfeit the right without questioning the practice even though it is discriminatory.

Respondent 141 (developed village) argued:

“It is not necessary for women. Nor do I think it is necessary for men. I think the only thing that is necessary in this context is equity. As long as a property is liable to a woman as much as it is to a man, I am sure most of it will start to speak for itself.”

Respondent 188 (underdeveloped village) said:

“Here I am in a dilemma. Of course it is necessary. But at the same time, since it is not in our practice, we cannot go against that too. Everyone has different views, but for me, I feel it is not important. If it is needed, we are given the privilege to use it. We should contend with that.”

Key informant 9 observed why women are in a dilemma as to whether property inheritance rights are necessary for women and pointed out that:

“As a woman, I do not believe in the right for women to inherit ancestral properties since it is not in our norm. Hence, it is acceptable if it is only given to men. But if we look at it more deeply, in a circumstance where all of the brothers were granted land and the sister was not, one would wonder why she was excluded from it. And if we ponder why, it is not handed to

women, then we understand it is because we have been socialised to believe that only men have the privilege because they carry the lineage. When all that happens, we just grumble about it and leave it as it is since we are unable to argue for it because it goes against our norms.”

The analysis explored the perceived reality and relevance of property rights within the cultural and economic context of Ao Naga society. The responses reflect a society that is grappling with tradition and modernity, where notions of equality, self-sufficiency, and cultural preservation intersect and conflict arises, while at the same time they coexist as individuals are caught between socio-economic needs and the deep-rooted cultural practice.

The following analysis is based on the earlier insights where many respondents expressed hesitation or resistance to demanding property rights, their legitimacy and their necessity. Despite recognising their value, the study further explored whether respondents believed that there is a need to bring changes to the property inheritance system or not.

Table 6.17 Need for inheritance reform

Need for inheritance reform	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency/ (%)
Yes	11	6	17 (8.5%)
No	80	75	155 (77.5%)
No Idea	9	19	28 (14%)
Total	100	100	200 (100%)

As per the responses obtained, the majority of 155 respondents (77.5%) expressed opposition to inheritance reform, reflecting a strong commitment to traditional norms that favour male inheritance. This perception was apparent in both developed (80) and underdeveloped (75) villages, highlighting that cultural beliefs related to gender roles in property rights are deeply rooted regardless of the village types. This indicates that women have internalised the

patriarchal values and are also apprehensive about potential social or familial backlash if they attempt to challenge or go against the inheritance system.

Respondent 92 (underdeveloped village) plainly noted:

“We all need to understand why the practice is the way it is. If we understand that, then we get to know what we should do and what our role is. A woman should be like a woman and should not interfere in every aspect.”

Respondent 170 (underdeveloped village) highlights the importance of preserving our culture and stated:

“The world is changing and growing, but our tradition, be it one’s language or cultural practice, sets us apart and identifies who we are. So, it is better if we preserve our sobaliba because that is our identity. Today, with the growing influence of Western culture, emphasis should be on preserving our culture and practices. Our cultural practices set us apart from other tribes, and it is our identity. We are incomplete without our practices, and such practices are our identity no matter how good or bad they are.”

Respondent 97 (underdeveloped village) stated that the practice exists for a reason:

“See, our inheritance practice is based on the understandings that our forefathers developed to suit our society. There is a reason behind the practice. So, I don’t think that the prevailing norms should change. Of course, the practice is favouring only men but there is a reason for that and men do give women the privilege and do not say no when it comes to self-acquired properties. So, I feel that is enough.”

Respondent 49 (developed village) reasoned that:

“We say land is our life, and if we are greedy in land, we are not blessed. We have been taught that with regard to clan rights, men have the right, and we know that. So, I feel it is not right to fight for that right. I do not want to be a part of any controversy related to land.”

Similarly, Respondent 80 (developed village) noted:

“In practice women have been given the privilege to utilise the land through men. And if the parents had acquired properties, they were and have been given a share in that too. So, women should not fight for the right or demand a share which belongs to men.”

Key informant 18 explained why such thoughts and perspectives occur:

“The thought for a need for change or reform arises with the change in time and questioning the prevalent discrimination. And it is obvious: wisdom, understanding, seeing the way others live and practice, and summarising all that women do. Do they realise things and wonder what will happen if they get? Isn't it better if we do it that way? Such thoughts arise. But it also does not mean that the cultural practice we have is totally wrong and that bringing in reform or seeking change is absolutely correct.”

Key informant 17 speculated that if change and reform were to occur, then the Ao society would undergo drastic changes, stating that:

“We will have to restructure our whole system. The folksongs and tales, our practices, festivals, governance and everything. It will be a new approach and a new dimension, so the base in which we stand now, or our cultural identity and societal foundation, will have to be which is not possible.”

Similarly, Key Informant 12 also asserted that:

“At this juncture, talking about giving land or the rights to clan land may be premature. Because even in acquired properties we are not able to, instances still occur where women are denied those rights. Instead, we need to take incremental steps; not at once, because that is not possible. Incremental steps in the sense of starting with the acquired property.”

Key Informant 8 further mentioned that:

“Even in the apex women’s body (Watsu Mungdang), we do not talk or debate about the rights or reforming the practice for ancestral clan land. Even if we ask, it would never be given because that practice does not align with us Aos. Women are even prohibited from voicing out for such rights. So, the thought of questioning or reforming the inheritance practice is out of context.”

On the other hand, 17 respondents (8.5%) expressed support for reforming inheritance practices, with 11 respondents from developed villages and 6 respondents from underdeveloped villages sharing this view, pointing out that Ao women do not really share a need for enhanced equality and reform, which would provide greater opportunities for women.

Respondent 32 (developed village) says that there should be reform, noting that:

“I say yes because of my personal experience. After my father passed away, the farm that we had passed down to my uncle. Of course, I understand it is in clan land, but the fact that I used to work and help on the farm when my father was alive and now it is going to my uncle because of our gender, I kind of feel discriminated against.”

Respondent 84 (developed village) stated that with the change in time, progress should come:

“The world is changing, back then men did almost everything from looking after the family to taking care of their sustenance. But now times are changing with the coming of education. Now people are becoming more aware and more capable. So it’s better to have equality irrespective of gender.”

Respondent 103 (underdeveloped village), basing her views on equality and Christian ideals, stated:

“Since we accepted Christianity, men and women are not differentiated and are treated equally. So, to my understanding, others might say no or be against it but for me we are all equal as humans and in faith as a Christian, and based on that equality, I feel even women should have the rights.”

Respondent 102 (underdeveloped village) thinks the practice should change but at the same time acknowledges it is difficult, stating:

“I think that the existing norms should change because as a woman I feel it is wrong that we don’t have the right to land because of cultural practices. But at the same time I also get where it comes from. Though I wish for it to change, I know it is impossible at the moment.”

Respondent 174 (underdeveloped village) also shared the same perspective:

“I am a strong believer in women’s rights. Inheritance should be given to women too. Why? Because, be it man or woman, I believe in equality. Because at the end of the what does a woman get? However, since it is not in our custom, a woman should not go against that either.”

Here, Key Informant 17 opined that:

“One should really understand the actual scenario, taking into consideration different aspects, and then see if they should ask for equal rights.”

Meanwhile, 28 respondents (14%) were indecisive, with nine respondents from developed villages and 19 from underdeveloped villages. This highlights that although some respondents are aware of the discussion regarding inheritance reform, this group of respondents were uncertain whether such a reform is needed or not.

Respondent 12 (underdeveloped village) says she can't decide on either:

“Can't say whether the laws should change or not. We have been doing it since time immemorial, and it has been ok.”

While Respondent 175 (underdeveloped village) noted:

“For me, I assume the practice to be normal. Since our forefathers it has been that way, and we accept it as the norm without even questioning why. So never thought or imagined for a change.”

Respondent 166 (underdeveloped village) admitted that she questions the practice but at the same time leaves it as it is, stating:

“We have accepted the practice, but if we think about it, it is discriminatory, and I question why it is. But then again, even if we think about it, what will happen? Nothing would. So, we leave it as it is.”

Respondent 182 (underdeveloped village) stated that she does not go against the practice, saying:

“I do feel it is wrong. At the same time, I do not want to be known as ‘the woman who does not know sobaliba’. Our social position is bad as it is being addressed as Sengawa (leaves) or

Anüing Nuza. Now imagine if we go against the Sobaliba and ask for land. The amount of backlash would be immense.”

Respondent 166 (underdeveloped village) explains why women do not go against the practice:

“Even if we feel the need for change or want change to come, I don’t think there would be change. We women do not think much against the practice and have accepted it as it is. We are used to it, and it is deeply rooted within us. So, we rarely question the practice, nor do we feel the need for change.”

Lastly, Respondent 143 (developed village) mentioned something to ponder upon:

“Do we change our traditions and customs for equality, or do we ignore equality to safeguard our traditions and customs? So, I think we can agree to a middle point that’s acquired land and ancestral property distinguishment.”

Thus, while voices for change are increasing, they are still overshadowed and constrained by cultural identity, fear of repercussions, and internalised societal norms. The hesitation to bring change and reform stems not only from adhering to tradition but also because of its cultural legitimacy and a complicated relationship of identity, continuation and modern ideals of equality.

Women in Ao society thus face numerous barriers starting from socio-cultural practices to legal and local governance structures as well as psychological barriers. Women’s gender also plays a significant role, with the symbolic identity attached to land, coupled with patrilineal practices and a male-dominated political system that maintain and create an exclusionary inheritance system. This is further reinforced by the patriarchy that dominates the social norms in Ao society. The local governance system is also gender biased, with limited decision-making for women, and customary laws serve as

a significant obstacle, despite the prevalence of formal legal structures. All these create an environment where customary laws protected under Article 371 (A) of the Indian Constitution override the formal legal structures, creating a dual legal system which renders the formal laws ineffective against customary practices. Moreover, even though the inheritance practice is discriminatory, with women facing numerous challenges, Ao women themselves uphold and perpetuate the system, as they have been socialised and internalised to believe and accept the inheritance practices as the norm. At the same time, the women themselves believe that property inheritance rights are not necessary for women, nor do they believe that there is a need for change or reform in the inheritance practice of Ao society.

In light of that, the following section examines the respondent's perspectives of what can be done and the vital role that government and civil societies can play when it comes to women's inheritance rights in Ao society.

6.5 Role of Government and Social Society

Government and social societies play a crucial role in promoting equality and advancing women's rights in different aspects, including inheritance rights. While legal reforms to equality and formal laws are initiated by the state, the acceptance and implementation of them depend on the local governments and the civil societies, especially within tribal societies. In India, the Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act 2005 marked a critical step and initiative towards gender equality in inheritance rights. However, it is not applicable in tribal societies governed by customary laws, such as those protected under Article 371 (A) of the Indian Constitution in the state of Nagaland. Here, the role of government and civil societies becomes vital in bringing awareness and social engagement around the issues of gender equality and inheritance rights.

In the context of Ao society, despite the prevalence of legal measures such as the Hindu Succession (Amendment) 2005, customary law takes precedence and when the women themselves do not perceive the need for reform in the inheritance practice, awareness of legal rights and practices becomes very

critical, especially when it comes to acquired property rights. In ancestral clan properties the rights for women are excluded due to cultural sensitivity issues. But when it comes to acquired properties, a rights-based approach coupled with awareness and civil engagement can help address the gender disparities and circumstances of unfair treatment. As such, in the following analysis under different tables, the perspectives of the respondent and the role of government and civil society organisations (CSOs) are further explored.

Language has been a primary obstacle in South Asia for women's access to justice, where laws are often draughted in English or Hindi, alienating rural and tribal women from understanding it (Gooneskere, 2004). While Bhatla et al. (2006) emphasised that legal empowerment on women's rights comes from dissemination of information by translating important laws through different means in the local community media. This becomes important in contexts like Ao society, where the majority of women remain unaware of their potential legal rights and entitlements under different formal laws empowered through the Constitution of India. As such, the respondent's perspectives on whether it is important to translate laws into local languages or publish information in local newspapers to increase awareness about women's rights to access, use and control over land and other productive resources are explored.

Table 6.18 Translation of laws into local language

Translation of laws into local language	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency/ (%)
Yes	100	100	200 (100%)
Total	100	100	200 (100%)

Across both developed and underdeveloped villages the respondents unanimously agreed on the need to translate laws into the local language to enhance their awareness and make more informed decisions in matters that would benefit them. This uniformity highlights that despite different levels of

development, education, infrastructure and geographical contexts, individuals recognise and understand the importance of legal frameworks that govern their lives. Such efforts would bridge the gap between cultural and legal dualism that arises in tribal societies governed by overlapping systems of customary and statutory laws. However, legal empowerment and access to statutory rights would only apply in relation to acquired properties.

Despite the growing awareness of legal rights, customary norms still influence the matters related to inheritance in ancestral and clan properties, and this influence extends to the acquired properties as well, leading to instances and examples where daughters are denied the rights to acquired properties, citing the customary inheritance norm as the reason behind its denial. Therefore, the efforts of government and civil society organisations (CSOs) become essential in supporting individuals, particularly women, in navigating the complex legal terrains by bringing awareness through efforts such as translating the laws into local languages.

Respondent 148 (developed village) noted:

“Everyone, including me, is hardly aware of legal rights and terms. Translating the law into our language would make it easier for us to understand and talk about it at home, with friends or in gatherings. That way we can understand it and maybe use them.”

While Respondent 163 (underdeveloped village) was stating her opinion, she mentioned that:

“Such awareness needs to be there. But at the same time, especially in villages, people might take it in the wrong way. Everyone understands differently. Some might say- ‘we are told to ask the land/ask for the right to inherit’. Might misunderstand and take it from the wrong perspective. So, it is difficult to engage in such issues. If people do not understand. However,

such steps would help tackle that in creating more understanding and awareness.”

Thus, there is a collective desire of Ao women to understand the legal laws and effectively navigate their rights wherever applicable. This would be possible through the initiatives by government and civil societies to bridge the gap between formal and customary laws. Locally accessible and culturally sensitive legal education stands as a crucial step towards legal empowerment and social change, enabling women not only to comprehend the laws but also to assert their rights.

Key Informant 11 pointed out that:

“In recent times we are aware that acquired properties of parents are equally distributed irrespective of gender. However, we also see that instances occur when such rights are denied to women, when such cases occur, what I feel is that people do it because they are not aware of things. They do it believing that they are doing the right thing as per the Sobaliba. Here the NGOs and civil society organisations can play a vital role. They can bring in a coded law for the acquired properties or translate laws and awareness into local languages. The government may also implement the same -to oversee the acquired properties with a written law, and such issues can be managed through awareness and legal knowledge.”

Key Informant 8 also stressed the importance of a coded law stating that:

“Since there is no codified law, instances occur where women are denied the rights even when they have every right to them. If there was a codified law, everyone would follow it, but since there is none, only the ones who understand the practices and differentiate between ancestral and acquired properties honour the practices.”

It is therefore evident that awareness initiatives are vital, but government and civil society organisations must also confront the deeply rooted societal and cultural practices in tribal societies that exclude women from inheritance rights. Despite the availability of legal frameworks that support and stand for women's rights, customary laws and traditional practices make it difficult to implement such frameworks. There is also reluctance to initiate conversations around women's inheritance due to social anxieties about disrupting the long-standing inheritance practices, especially with regard to ancestral properties. When such an issue arises, it becomes difficult to address, and a significant reluctance also emerges in recognising it. The following analysis explores the respondent's opinion on the reluctance of government and civil societies in addressing women's inheritance rights.

Table 6.19 Reluctance in addressing women's property issues

Reluctance in addressing women's property issues	Developed Frequency	Undeveloped Frequency	Total Frequency/ (%)
Yes	44	33	77 (38.5%)
No	34	35	69 (34.5%)
No Idea	22	32	54 (27%)
Total	100	100	200 (100%)

A significant 77 respondents (38.5%) agreed that there is reluctance among different organisations and parties to engage with women's property issues. This indicates that the majority perceive tangible barriers in addressing gender equality in matters of property inheritance. Also, respondents from developed villages showed a higher portion of reluctance than underdeveloped villages, indicating that increased awareness in developed villages does not reduce or eliminate the patriarchal norms and its control in society.

As Respondent 39 (developed village) reflected:

“In a society, even if one is determined to stand for something or a belief, when the majority is against it or does not agree, then

the majority opinion dominates, and individuals and even organisations are reluctant to go against that opinion or belief.”

Similarly, Respondent 199 (underdeveloped village) shared the same belief:

“No matter how right they are from the sense of equality, if the change or the stand is against the traditionally held belief, then definitely, they would be hesitant, as the general public and society would not entertain it.”

Respondent 69 (developed village) also noted:

“No matter how big the organisations are, one would be reluctant to go against a customary belief and practice which is not in the norm.”

Key informant 18 pointed out why such reluctance occurs and stated that:

“Land is our identity. As long as it is our identity, it will not change, and as long as the land belongs to the clan or community, reluctance will always be there, as no one would want to go against that. The day we change this practice; our identity will be lost or submerged. Some may argue that other women have the right to inherit and that organisations and government should bring in reform; we have to know that the beginning of social history is different. Therefore, we cannot be the same. Through the wisdom that our forefathers have, they created this practice to suit our cultural norms and values. As such, we cannot destroy that.”

Conversely, 69 respondents (34.5%) opined that there is no such reluctance among individuals or organisations and actively engage in issues of property inheritance and women’s rights in Ao society. They were of the belief that different societal organisations and even the government actively promote and stands for women’s rights in acquired properties where every individual has

equal access and rights to it. However, in regard to ancestral properties, since it is out of scope because of the customary laws and practices, the need to promote the rights is largely avoided.

Respondent 37 (developed village) pointed out:

“NGOs form or exist to benefit and share or be the voice of the people. If they want to, they can and are capable of sharing their opinions. I don’t think they in general would be reluctant. However, if they stood against the norms, they would indeed face strong criticism, resistance and bans as well.”

Respondent 153 (underdeveloped village) elaborated that:

“When some women say that everyone should have equal rights to land, even in community land with change in time, this is the universal thought/thinking, and I don’t disregard that. However, the traditional practices cannot be contested, and as long as we are tribals and base our identity on that, then that practice is not possible for us. On the other hand, the government and civil societies and individuals in general all stand for the acquired property rights, and there is no problem in that.”

While the remaining 54 respondents (27%) stated that they have no idea whether there is reluctance or not on the side of government and civil societies. The issue of women’s rights is often overlooked since inheritance rights are closely linked to the lineage and identity of the Ao Nagas, so the practice goes unquestioned, and individuals in society do not question it. Hence, when asked about the issue, they are often unaware and have no idea whether such is the case or not.

Respondent 31 (developed village) shared:

“I have never been a part of any organisations, nor have I been in their show. So, I have no idea how things would proceed or

how they would feel. But I guess, like individuals, they might be reluctant if it is against the customary traditional practices.”

Thus, there is a divided perception among the respondents on the role of government and civil societies and their reluctance on addressing women's property rights. While some believe that there is no reluctance as such, especially on acquired properties that are not bound by traditional inheritance practices; a significant number believe that patriarchal norms and customary practices continue to create obstacles. The reluctance to engage with ancestral properties reflects the broader hesitation to challenge the customary practices that have been handed down, accepted and followed as the norm.

In light of the divided perception of the role of government and civil societies in addressing the issue of women's property and inheritance rights, the analysis further examines the respondent's awareness of the specific actions and undertakings that the civil societies have carried out to empower women in their inheritance rights. The following analysis highlights the key activities and programmes that the civil societies have initiated in supporting women to understand and assert their rights over acquired properties.

Respondent 4 (developed village) stated:

“The church has taken different initiatives with the aim of having more discussions within the women's fellowship to bring more awareness among the women, especially in rural villages.”

Sharing similar perspectives, Respondents 8 and 24 (developed village) mentioned the initiatives taken by Watsü Mungdang:

“Came across fliers or advertisements of public contests like essay writing on the said issue and organising seminars and radio broadcasts talking about the issue and giving awareness to people.”

Civil societies using media outlets have contributed to bringing awareness among the general public. Respondent 6 (developed village) mentioned:

“The only thing I know of would be a discussion broadcast on the radio. Besides that, I haven’t heard or known much.”

While Respondent 37 (developed village) highlighted a movie she watched:

“Came across a popular movie on YouTube titled ‘Senmang’, which was very informative. Besides that, there was a book by a civil servant too.

Respondent 166 (underdeveloped village) reflected on the ongoing efforts by Watsü Mungdang:

“Since 1982 discussions have been going on about the issue. The Watsü has been bringing the agenda, talking about such rights in the Ao Women’s general conference and on various occasions.”

Respondent 196 (underdeveloped village) also affirmed that the discussions have been persistent:

“As far as I know, the Watsü takes the initiative to bring changes in things that need to be addressed.”

Respondent 153 (underdeveloped village), a member of Watsü Mungdang herself, emphasised:

“It is a topic Watsü often discusses. We have also stood for women’s rights and organised seminars on different occasions, like International Women’s Day, focusing on certain key issues.”

However, despite the efforts, some respondents expressed uncertainty regarding its impact or visible initiatives taken by the civil societies. Respondent 68 (developed village) acknowledged that:

“I have been hearing about these talks within households and in the society and the Watsü discussing about it, but I have no idea about anything done specifically.”

Respondent 14 (underdeveloped village) noted:

“I haven’t heard much. We don’t even get a newspaper, so no idea.”

Similarly, Respondent 123 (underdeveloped village) stated:

“I have no idea. No such activities in our village, I think. So, they can do more to make us aware, especially in villages. But I think even they, as a strong organisation, cannot do much on the inherited property stances, and I don’t think they would.”

Respondent 170 (underdeveloped village), on the other hand, believed that such issues are more prevalent in urban areas:

“We stay in a village, and here people usually don’t have such issues, so we are not really aware of what goes on. But I guess in the town/urban areas it’s more of an issue there. Moreover, if we didn’t have the issue, I don’t think such initiatives would come.”

Respondent 46 (developed village) was also sceptical, stating:

“So far, I have heard of them fighting for women’s rights, but I don’t think they can do much/raise their voices with regard to land.”

Multiple respondents also noted that while Watsü Mungdang is respected and takes up the initiatives to improve the well-being of women in Ao society, they may be hesitant to directly challenge ancestral property rights held by men. Respondent 158 (developed village) reflected:

“It is something related to our cultural practices. I don’t think that much can be done despite the efforts.”

While Respondent 44 (developed village) added:

“Watsü stands for the welfare of women and to uplift them. But I have not come across them standing for the rights of land for women, especially in ancestral properties.”

And Respondent 147 (developed village) also stated:

“Not necessarily any activity to empower the women on inheriting ancestral properties. But camping/discussions were held advocating for acquired properties to be given even to women through parents’ wills.”

Some respondents were entirely unaware of such activities, like in the case of Respondent 5 (developed village), who plainly stated:

“I haven’t heard much, or rather, none.”

Although challenges persist, especially in relation to ancestral properties, civil societies have been actively involved in creating awareness through different means and advocating for women’s property rights, serving as vital intermediaries between the state and the community, especially in tribal societies like the Ao Nagas, where legal frameworks often remain distant from the lives of the people. Moreover, despite all the initiatives and awareness efforts, a common sentiment shared by the respondents is that customary and cultural practices deter the impact of such initiatives on ancestral properties and even at times with acquired properties, remaining as a persistent barrier for women’s right to inherit property in Ao society.

While women in Ao society have largely accepted the customary inheritance practice and opine that there is no need for change in the ancestral inheritance practice, many hold the expectation that the situation could be different in acquired property rights, where change is seen to be possible and acceptable.

The following analysis highlights the perspective of the respondents on the role that government and civil societies can play in promoting women's rights to acquired properties and strengthening the property rights for women in general.

Many respondents see government and civil societies as the key to bringing awareness by educating people and challenging patriarchal norms, particularly when it comes to acquired properties. Respondent 7 (developed village) suggested:

"They should create awareness by holding discussions, publications, and creative writings; even you scholars can contribute with your research."

Similarly, Respondent 24 (developed village) argued:

"As patriarchal heritage has been in practice, where only men can inherit or own properties in our customary laws, in regard to the inheritance of land by women, the only way the government and civil societies can support it is by creating awareness and properly educating the people and breaking the patriarchal mindset, especially in acquired properties."

Respondent 44 (developed village) pointed out that:

"Today we talk about equal share in acquired property. But women lack equal rights even in that. The government or civil societies cannot do much in the traditional practice. But in terms of issues related to acquired properties, they have every right, and in that, the public need more awareness and understanding."

Respondent 53 (developed village) particularly stressed the humanist approach:

“Proper awareness should be disseminated for the need to differentiate and understand between ancestral/communal property and acquired property. What I always feel is that a woman should clearly understand her rights and should be comfortable with who/what her right is. Civil societies or others can give knowledge to such, and it should also be looked at from a humanist perspective.”

Echoing this, Respondent 54 (developed village) observed:

“The issue that we see today or we are debating about is equal rights in acquired properties. However, still today we see cases of inequality or discrimination in it. Such instances occur because there is a lack of awareness and understanding. Civil societies and government bodies should focus on disseminating awareness on such issues. The general public should be able to differentiate the two and understand their workings. Plus, they should be aware of their rights as well and not mix things up.”

Respondent 197 (underdeveloped village), sharing her opinion, stated:

“I feel that people demand or feel the need for change without understanding the real reason as to why land is not given to women. Here awareness is needed.”

Respondent 168 (underdeveloped village) acknowledged:

“Before today such an issue hardly came across my mind. I, as a woman, didn’t think much because we have been accustomed to it. But I feel that awareness through the different organisations can awaken us.”

The Aos follow customary law when it comes to the inheritance practice, like the rest of the Nagas, and it is neither codified nor a written law. Patriarchy dominates over it, and instances occur where women are even denied the right

to the parents' acquired properties, stating customary law and practices as the reason behind its denial and exclusion. In such instances, a codified written law that would respect the customary practices and at the same time honour equality irrespective of gender can mediate the issue. The respondents thus emphasised the need for formal, codified or uniform laws that would govern the acquired property rights and which everyone can follow. Respondent 89 (developed village) argued that:

“The current situation arises because there is no clear law or inheritance for us. So maybe they can establish clear written law which everyone can accept and follow.”

Respondent 170 (underdeveloped village) reasoned that:

“In our democratic society today every man and woman is equal and should be treated equally in our understanding. But since it has not been the tradition or practice from the beginning, we cannot discard that too. Women today who are asking for their right are justified, as both men and women are both human beings, and if both are to be given the same right, then it depends on Ao Senden in revising the customary laws and practices and bringing that change. Then that cannot be ignored and can be followed.”

Respondent 171 (underdeveloped village) further stressed that:

“It depends a lot on Ao Senden. Be it coded law, it would only be possible through their initiative. As if change were to come, it should be from them.”

Moreover, in Ao society, since it is patriarchal and patrilineal in nature, political participation, governance and decision-making are in the hands of men alone. Women do not have the right, nor can they participate in the Senso Mungdang as well. The respondents believed that if women are given the platforms to speak and the opportunity to participate in the decision-making

process, then the rest would follow. Respondent 9 (developed village) advised to:

“Engage more women in the decision-making activities and governance, be it civic, political or at the community level. Also, through new policies, schemes, laws, rights, and sustainable strategies, keeping in mind the local context and customs, awareness and reforms can slowly be brought in acquired properties.”

Respondent 93 (underdeveloped village) argued that:

“For the transformation to come, we need a common platform to speak out. Since there is no platform now, the talks are all within one’s kitchen. So, when that platform comes, one can speak up for the whole. To bring that platform, Ao Senden has to play the biggest/most influential role, for if they can oversee it, then it would be possible.”

Respondent 153 (underdeveloped village) emphasised:

“The civil societies can start the conversation about this by bringing into light through various sources because it is still a taboo subject that is not discussed openly or freely even in our modern-day society. Forget the talk for ancestral properties; even if they are acquired properties, they are still controversial.”

Respondent 163 (underdeveloped village) acknowledged that:

“For me, leaving aside the issue of land, the first thing we need to do is to allow the women to participate in Senso Mungdang. A woman is also a citizen too. Being a part of that Senso Mungdang would help solve a lot of issues in our Ao society. I and my brother belong to the same clan and village, but only my

brother is considered a citizen. So, when a woman becomes a part of the Senso, I believe the rest would follow.”

Respondent 169 (underdeveloped village) challenged the exclusion, stating:

“Ao Senden should pass the resolution that women should be allowed to attend the Senso Mungdang. Women are not allowed to attend, so how can we express our rights, or how would men understand us? Men say women do not understand sobaliba or should not ask for ancestral land. But how can women understand if we are not involved in such discussions? How do they expect us to understand the sobaliba if we are not allowed even in the Senso Mungdang? We say Senso Mungdang, but women are not allowed to participate; in the end, women end up becoming worthless. Thus women, because of that, ask and stand for the right.”

Respondent 10 (developed village) outlined the role they can play:

“Act as advocates, bringing dialogue and discussions, support women’s organisations, create awareness and empower women psychologically and emotionally as well. Moreover, you researchers can conduct research to identify the local root cause of the problem. As such, the barriers can be conveyed and facilitated to policymakers, both local and national.”

Here, on the role of different organisations and stakeholders, Key Informant 17 pointed out what he has noticed in Ao society and stated that:

“We have many different seminars and Christian revivals almost constantly. But when it comes to such social and cultural aspects besides the 2 festivals of Tsungremong and Moatsu, there is not much. The very essence of the Ao culture, such as inheritance/marriage practices, is the main focal point. Why is it not talked about more? We need more awareness and

understanding of our culture. We need to differentiate the Western culture from our culture. These days we do not have the actual understanding of our culture; instead, we interpret it through our own vague understanding without knowing the core reason. Therefore, efforts should be made to bring in such awareness by different stakeholders.”

Besides that, Key Informant 18 commented that the role of researchers and documentation of cultural practices and traditions should be given attention. He therefore opined that:

“At the most NGOs or different organisations can organise programmes to educate the people in the form of radio talks and seminars and disseminate the ideas. If it is doable, and it is doable, society should encourage scholars to write about the practices and traditions of the AOs. Till now we have inadequate written records of our practices. If this continues, then we are heading towards a direction where one day we will realise that we have tremendously neglected our customary practices. From the original practice we might deviate, because history is the history of winners.”

Beyond the role of government and civil societies, the respondents also emphasised that families and households should also play a critical role rather than solely relying on external factors. Socialisation starts with the family, where the values, beliefs and gender norms imparted by the parents form the foundation of how the roles and responsibilities are perceived in adulthood.

Respondent 46 (developed village) asserted:

“I don’t think the societal organisations can do much. It depends on the family a lot as well, as the clarity and understanding should come from within the family.”

Respondent 49 (developed village) agreed that:

“I don’t expect much from the society or from any organisations. But I think it is the family. The main thing is the family.”

Respondent 85 (developed village) specified on the role of parents:

“Parents should create understanding at the household level. The understanding should arise from the household, and change comes from the family, not from a big arena. Watsü can also bring out some guidelines or boundaries. Guidelines for reflection on what can be done to benefit all.”

The inheritance practice is the way it is because of the traditional and cultural norms attached to it. The respondents opined that the cultural practices should be respected and upheld, as they are relevant to suit the need and the betterment for all parties involved in our society. Respondent 174 (underdeveloped village), being a bit cautious, stated:

“Equality for both men and women is a must. But when it comes to inheritance, I don’t agree much. We have to respect our culture and tradition too, and on that I feel such organisations need to play the role where through them the society can get proper awareness of what and how things should be.”

Respondent 175 (underdeveloped village) downplayed the concerns:

“I do not think of it as a big issue. We women do not have the right to inherit, but we are given the privilege whenever needed. Of course, as humans, not everyone is equal, and there will be instances where the right thing is not done. So, in those matters such organisations can do the needful.”

While Respondent 194 (underdeveloped village) warned that:

“When we look at the issues today, I feel we are slowly losing our culture. Young people moving out and learning new things. When that happens, we forget our roots and practice. That is

why such issues or questions arise. That is why such issues or questions arise. The different organisations should do their part by bringing more understanding.”

Lastly, the respondents emphasised the role that Ao Senden should play, whether it be to change, write and codify law or decide on the issue. Respondent 168 (underdeveloped village) reiterated:

“If they can come up with a uniform written law that would be accepted by all, then it would be a great step.”

Similarly, Respondent 171 (underdeveloped village) reaffirmed that:

“It depends a lot on Ao Senden. Be it coded law, it would only be possible through their initiative. As if change were to come, it should be from them.”

And Respondent 197 (underdeveloped village) concluded:

“I feel that people need or feel the need for change without understanding the real reason as to why land is not given to women. Here maybe they can take the role to give the awareness.”

However, Key Informant 13 opined that:

“Even if we try to come up with a uniform practice or law, every Ao village differs and would want to have their own way. What suits one village may not suit another since every Ao village is its own republic. So it is good to have a common inheritance law that will act as a boundary line and bind something uniformly, but in our society, I don’t see it happening because it entails a lot of complexities. The thought that it has been done this way and it has to go this way is very stringent.”

There is a growing awareness of the need for equality in acquired property rights, even though Ao women typically accept the customary norms governing ancestral property. Respondents strongly emphasise the roles that civil society and the government play, and above all the role of Ao Senden in bringing about change, whether it be through inclusive decision-making platforms, codified laws, or public awareness. They also emphasise that since socialisation begins within the family, shaping the gender norms and values, change must start there. The aspirations of the respondents also reflect a cautious yet optimistic view towards a culturally sensitive reform respecting the cultural traditions and pursuing equality and fair treatment for all.

The findings of this chapter show that the lack of property and inheritance rights for women in Ao society is a result of a complex interaction of patriarchal norms, customary laws, socio-cultural traditions, and a lack of legal knowledge. In spite of the Indian Constitution formally guaranteeing gender equality, the dominance of customary law through Article 371(A) leads to the prevalence of traditional customs which govern the inheritance and land ownership practices in Ao society. Men thus dominate and own all the ancestral property, and even in acquired properties where women are theoretically entitled to have the rights, customary interpretations and family dynamics often result in denial of the rights for women.

Patriarchy functions not only through legal and structural frameworks but also through psychological barriers and internalised beliefs, and many women view their exclusion as “the way things are”, keeping them discouraged from questioning the norms out of fear of social repercussions and consequences. Their position is further weakened by a lack of knowledge about legal provisions, a lack of exposure to rights, education or training, and a lack of familiarity with prospects like wills. Even when women acknowledge that there is discrimination, cultural identity, clan-based land ownership and patriarchy, they justify male inheritance, further reinforcing the secondary status of women in Ao society with lesser rights compared to men.

While owning property can improve financial stability, influence decision-making, and elevate social status, the study indicates that women in Ao society do not consider it as the only way to empowerment; rather, they also stress self-sufficiency through education and employment. However, the lack of secure property rights often renders them reliant on men, with no rights to decision-making and participation in governance, which in turn makes them vulnerable to violence and exploitation.

Nonetheless, the study concludes that the exclusion of women from property rights in Ao society will continue to exist as an unquestionable norm rather than being contested, and deviation from the accepted norm would encounter stigmatisation and even ostracisation. This became evident during interactions with the sampled respondents. The only possible outcome and realistic progress lie in securing and guaranteeing equal rights for women in acquired properties through proper legal laws and awareness, which can be done through the intervention of government and civil society organisations as well as the stakeholders involved in general.

6.6 Focus Group Discussion

So far, this study has examined and explored the perspectives of Ao women and key informants on the inheritance rights and practices in Ao society with regard to ownership status, decision-making, control and the barriers to women's inheritance rights. Now to have a better understanding of the inheritance practice in Ao society and how the customary norms are interpreted and upheld by the traditional formal institution, a focus group discussion was held with the District Dobashi Customary Law Court in Mokokchung on 13th November 2023.

The District Dobashi Customary Law court has 19 members in total representing the 6 Ranges of Mokokchung Town (Changkikong, Tsurangkong, Japukong, Asetkong, Langpangkong and Jangpetkong) and the different villages under it. The members were also classified into 2 grades: DB 1 and DB 2, indicating their hierarchy or grading system, with DB 1 being a higher

or more senior rank compared to DB 2. Before the FGD was held, an appointment was scheduled earlier on a day and at a time convenient for the members. A semi-structured interview schedule was prepared, and on the day of the FGD, 14 members were present. Their collective insights across various themes are presented as a final synthesis of insights from a customary law point of view on women's inheritance rights, revealing how customary practices are justified and reproduced through traditional formal judicial structure.

When the question was asked whether the inheritance system was uniform across all 6 ranges and villages of Mokokchung, Respondent 2 (FGD) remarked that:

“Aos share one custom and tradition, but since every village is its own republic, the workings are different in some villages. However, when it comes to land and its inheritance in all the villages and ranges, a woman does not have the right to it.”

On how the inheritance system is practised in Ao society, Respondent 4 (FGD) elaborated that:

“Our forefathers often say a woman is someone who belongs to her husband after their marriage. A woman marries into her husband's clan or village in our practice, and that is why she has no right to the inheritance. Why? Because she goes away or belongs to her husband's clan or village. Of course, she has her identity in her clan, but she does not have any right to the clan's land. She is given the privilege to utilise the land of her husband and her father, but it is not given as inheritance. But both the inheritance and the debts, however, belong to men.”

Respondent 13 (FGD), on the other hand, noted that:

“Aor ji tebur yimli nung lia arur -Ao's live in a patriarchal society, so inheritance goes with men.”

When probed further on why women are not allowed to inherit, Respondent 1 (FGD) reasoned that:

“How can someone from another village come inside our village jurisdiction and own our village land? The same goes with the clan land. That is why women are not given inheritance.”

Respondent 8 (FGD) also added that:

“When a man is alive, he cannot do anything he wishes with the ancestral clan land that has been passed down through his forefathers. He can only have the right to utilise it when he is alive, and after he passes away, it will go down to his offspring from the clan.”

Respondent 12 (FGD) further emphasised that:

“We are not intentionally prohibiting the women or creating a barrier, but because our practice and culture were that way, women are not given the right to inherit.”

The perception that inheritance is tied to men’s historical role in headhunting was also explored. Respondent 3 (FGD) dismissed it as a contemporary interpretation:

“Such thoughts and understandings are today’s version. Our forefathers may not have thought in the line that since women do not go for headhunting, they will have no right to inherit.”

Respondent 9 (FGD) suggested why such ideas arise:

“When a new village was formed, men from different clans went and scouted the lands, and then the village was created, and during such events women did not accompany men. Only the men went and surveyed the land, and then they decided to bring their wives and children to form the village. As such, since the

men went out to look and survey the land, and when threats arose to safeguard the land, men went and fought for it with the notion that they occupied the land and they would fight for it. So maybe some think in that way.”

However, as Respondent 3 (FGD) reiterated, those are the modern perceptions, and based on our understanding or thoughts, we cannot assume that the practices were that way and women were not given the right to inherit because they didn't go for headhunting. Instead, it depends on kinship and marriage practices, patriarchy and village governance systems.

Regarding the relevance of the practice today, Respondent 3 (FGD) described it as:

“The base and foundation of Ao society. So, it is very much relevant even today to maintain the homogeneity and uniqueness of our culture.”

While Respondent 12 commented that:

“There is no change when it comes to inheritance. What practices and culture existed are still prevalent when it comes to ancestral clan properties. We cannot bring in a new practice, nor can we discard an old practice because it has been our culture. We are quite rigid when it comes to such.”

On situations where women do not receive acquired property, Respondent 1 (FGD) pointed out that:

“Even if we are all Aos, every village has their own practice and tradition. What is practised in one village may be a bit different in another village, and every village or individual may not agree that acquired properties should be given to women.”

Respondent 6 further clarified that:

“Parents gave their acquired properties to their daughters because of the awashi (etiquette) or affection. It is not a cultural practice but a privilege given to a daughter by her father. However, we have been brought up with the practice of land not being given to women. That practice exists today, and it will go on. Consequently, instances occur when male relatives deny women these assets.”

When asked whether such cases were discussed in the customary court, Respondent 1 (FGD) stated that for the past 32 years working as a Dobashi, to his knowledge, such cases were not brought there. Respondent 14 (FGD) explained why they have not come across it:

“One thing we need to understand is that when such cases arise, it is discussed within the clan since it is clan land. And if the clan members cannot decide on it, then it is discussed within the village jurisdiction and the council.”

Moreover, to overcome the discrimination or cases when acquired property rights are not given to women, the discussion turned to whether a law can be introduced to secure women’s rights over acquired property. Respondent 12 (FGD) argued that:

“Since every Ao village function as its own republic, we cannot bring in a common practice or a law which would be accepted by every village, even when it comes to acquired properties. The only thing we can say is that the parents and the stakeholder should understand and know the Awashi (etiquette). For Awashi there is no law, so how can we enforce that? It is innate, nor can we make a law for people to follow that Awashi.”

The perspective of some women asking for change and reform and equal rights to ancestral properties was also discussed. The members collectively dismissed the possibility. They even joked to “note down their names and their village

and give us their names. We can call to make them understand the traditions and practices.” Respondent 11 (FGD) further remarked that:

“Even acquired properties are not given in some instances, so for an Ao woman to be given a share in ancestral clan land is impossible. Within our cultural context it is totally impossible.”

While Respondent 7 (FGD) acknowledged women’s concern, stating:

“We understand why some women say that, and it is because the rights are only with men. However, one should also understand why the right is only with men and why the practice is that way.”

Regarding the potential impacts of granting ancestral inheritance rights to women, Respondent 6 (FGD) warned that:

“Men would have no inheritance. There won’t be any distinction between men and women, nor would we be able to maintain the clan homogeneity. Tell those women to not ask for such rights in ancestral properties.”

While Respondent 10 (FGD) added that:

“We won’t have the homogeneity of our society. It would create lots of chaos, and we won’t be able to safeguard and maintain our tradition and identity.”

Furthermore, on the issue of whether legislative enactments can be implemented, Respondent 14 (FGD) asserted that:

“Our customs and practices are protected by the constitution (Article 371 A). We cannot enact or implement something which is against our customary practices.”

The focus group discussion concluded with the steps that can be undertaken. Respondent 3 (FGD), the Head Dobashi, stressed the importance of understanding the tradition and practices. Do bring in that awareness and

understanding. He further stated that the Dobashi Customary Law Court has come up with a book in the Ao dialect titled “Aor Temzung Ozung - Ao Customary Laws and Regulations”, which was published in the year 2016, detailing the laws and norms or practices about the Putu Menden, citizenship, marriage practices, inheritance and women’s rights, to name a few.

While Respondent 2 (FGD) added that:

“The only thing we need to understand is our identity and the practices and traditions attached to it. Every individual needs to play their part in safeguarding our identity and maintaining it. We are a customary law court, and we work based on our cultural practices. At the same time, we are flexible in dealing with different matters. However, we cannot bring in a law stating that women should be given the rights to ancestral properties.”

The focus group discussion with the Dobashi Customary Law Court provides a perspective through the viewpoint of the Ao customary law to understand the prevailing inheritance practice. The discussion revealed that variations might occur in cultural practices, but land across Ao society is not inherited by women. This exclusion from property rights is rooted in patriarchy, kinship structures, and marriage practices, as well as the governance structure and political system of the Aos. The discussion also brought to light that even men who have the right to own and inherit the ancestral clan land cannot do so according to their own will and must stay within the accepted norms and practices.

The FGD also highlighted that the Ao customary law does not consider the exclusion of women as deliberate discrimination but as cultural obligations handed down throughout generations as the accepted norm. Emphasis was also laid on not basing the practice on contemporary understanding but on its cultural relevance, and stress was placed on the inheritance practice and its tradition being rigid and not affected by change in time. Moreover, women’s

appeal for reform and rights to ancestral properties was collectively dismissed, asserting that customary laws are protected under Article 371 (A) of the Indian Constitution.

The discussion also emphasised the need for greater awareness and distinction between ancestral and acquired properties and that any attempt to bring in change or reform would result in losing the homogeneity and chaos in the traditions and identity of the Aos. Thus, the conclusion of the FGD reinforces the broader findings of the study that women's exclusion from property rights in Ao society remains an unquestioned norm which is shaped by a complex interplay of socio-cultural traditions, patriarchal norms, customary laws, kinship and marriage structures, clan dynamics and identity, political structure, and gender norms that collectively shape the inheritance system of Ao society.

6.7 Case study

Case studies which substantiate the experiences of Ao Naga women in terms of inheritance rights and practices and the conflicts faced are elaborated here in this section. An in-depth analysis of certain unique cases which were identified during the course of data collection and fieldwork has been presented to supplement the understanding of the inheritance rights and practices in Ao Naga society.

The first case study is about the sole respondent who reported to have encountered a land dispute regarding the inheritance of her parents' acquired property.

Case Study -1

Intestate succession dispute of parents Acquired Property

Respondent No.: 6 (Developed Village)

Age: 50

Marital Status: Married

Education: Secondary School

Occupation: Self-Employed (Hotel Owner)

This case highlights the experience of Respondent 6, a 50-year-old woman from a family with no male siblings, and illustrates how gender and marital status, along with the customary norms, became an obstacle for a woman's right to inherit, even in the case of acquired property. The respondent came from a family of three daughters, with no sons. Her father had ancestral clan property in their village but primarily lived in a town, where they had purchased land and built a house through their own income. Although no formal written will was prepared, the daughters had been verbally assured by their parents that the acquired property would pass on to them.

However, after both parents passed away, the property was not inherited by the daughters. During discussions over the distribution of property, the respondent's paternal uncles opposed the idea of women inheriting the land. Their primary argument was not only gender-based but was largely influenced by the woman's marital status. All three siblings were married and no longer resided in the family home. The uncles contended that allowing the land to pass on to the married daughters meant that the property would eventually belong to another clan, specifically, the husbands' families through their offspring. This, they argued, was unacceptable. They stated:

“In our Sobaliba, women cannot own land. We, being male kin members, will look after it.”

Despite the daughters raising objections and attempting to claim what they believed was their rightful inheritance, the absence of a written will and the prevailing cultural belief that women should not inherit property negated their claim. Consequently, the daughters were barred from inheriting the property and had no say in the matter. Respondent 6 remarked that:

“If it was some ancestral inherited property, it wouldn’t have mattered much. But it was an acquired property, and we had every right to it. There are others who understand when it comes to acquired property and give women the rights to such properties. But even though they were our relatives, they didn’t and, instead, took away our parents’ acquired properties.”

When the respondent stated that, her husband, who was sitting along during the interview, interrupted and gave an interesting comment:

“In our society there is a way on how things are done. Land was inherited by men alone and since we have been living in that tradition, we tend to follow it and accept it as the norm even when it comes to acquired properties. What your relatives did by saying that they have the right to your father’s property was because you have no male siblings. They did so according to our inheritance practice only. That is our sobaliba. It is not the females’ right but the males’ right, and it is never wrong.”

This case illustrates how even acquired property, although not formally covered by customary inheritance laws and practices like ancestral clan properties, can sometimes still be restricted for women because of deep-rooted patriarchal customs and concerns about property leaving the clan. It highlights how a woman’s gender and her marital status to a man from another clan serve as significant obstacles to women’s rights to land, even when informal commitments are made within the family. Moreover, even within spouses, instead of taking the wife’s side, the husband rather supported the sobaliba and the rights of men even though it was acquired property. Sobaliba, or cultural

practice, is deeply rooted in Ao Naga society and dictates norms around property inheritance. It reflects a patriarchal system where property ownership and succession are male-dominated. Thus, a thin line exists where the inheritance norms can be interpreted for both the ancestral and clan properties, and men take advantage of that to claim the rights to acquired properties using sobaliba as the justification.

The next two case study explored the circumstances of unmarried women or spinsters who were given the permission to utilise their father's clan land.

Case Study - 2

Unmarried Woman's Allotment to Father's Clan Land

Respondent No.: 63 (Developed Village)

Age: 52

Marital Status: Unmarried

Education: Secondary School

Occupation: Self Employed (Weaver)

This case study examines Respondent 63 from a developed village who has remained single and unmarried throughout her life. She has five siblings (three brothers and two sisters) and is the youngest among them. While all her siblings are married, she chose to remain unmarried.

When asked about her decision, she stated:

"I didn't feel the need to get married. Not that I didn't find anyone suitable, but my life choices were such that I remained unmarried."

She explained that as her parents grew older, they required someone to care for them. Since she was the youngest and all her siblings had moved away after marriage, she decided to stay back and look after her parents. She also

expressed contentment in knowing that her siblings had their own families, and that she had nieces and nephews whom she could love and treat as her own.

Regarding her usufructuary rights over her father's clan land, the respondent noted that because she remained single and lived with her parents until their death, she was permitted to continue staying in her father's house which is a semi pucca house and use the associated land for the rest of her life. According to Ao customary practices, after the death of the parents, property is distributed based on customary inheritance practices, and the eldest son inherits the parental house.

However, the respondent mentioned that her brother, showing awashi (compassion and goodwill), allowed her to remain in their parents' house for as long as she lives, as a way of looking out for her as well as in recognition of the care she provided to their parents throughout their lives. She stated:

“Being a woman, I know I do not have any right to my father's land, but my brother and the clan members were gracious enough not to abandon me. They cared for me and gave me the right to stay at our father's place and call it my own. Of course, after I pass away, it will go back to my brother and his sons, but I am still glad that they took care of a woman like me.”

At present, the respondent resides in her parents' house, which has been formally inherited by her elder brother under customary law, but she has been granted the privilege and usufructuary rights to use it during her lifetime. In addition to the house, she has the right to cultivate the land attached to it, access produce from the kitchen garden and farm on clan land, and collect firewood for her sustenance.

Such is the case in Ao society, where even though women do not have the right to inherit the ancestral properties since it is highly dominated by patriarchal norms and is deeply rooted in it, the clan or the society in general looks after the women in Ao society.

The next case study presents a similar case of a spinster with a different situation.

Case Study - 3

Spinster with Usufructuary Right to Clan Land

Respondent no.: 166 (Underdeveloped Village)

Age: 51

Marital Status: Unmarried

Education: Graduate

Occupation: Employed (Teacher)

This third case study highlights the case of Respondent 166, a spinster from an underdeveloped village. She was granted permission by her father to build a house on his clan land. Respondent 166 works as a primary teacher in a government school and has built a pucca house with her income on the clan land. The use of the land is permission-based and not permanent, as it will revert to her clan upon her death. Respondent 166 stated:

“I come from a family with three daughters, and my father owns significant ancestral property in the form of clan land in the village. But since he fathered only daughters and no son, there is no provision for women to inherit it. However, since I have remained unmarried, and even though a women cannot own ancestral property, I was given permission by my father and the clan members to use a plot of land to build a house and live there.”

She also noted that she and her sibling even though they are all women:

“Can collect firewood from their fathers land and proudly claim that they could do such things from their father’s land even though they could not possess what men inherit.”

Thus, although women in Ao society do not possess formal rights to inherit their father’s ancestral property, the two-case study illustrates that they are not necessarily abandoned. Instead, they are supported by family members and the clan. The Ao Sobaliba and customary practices, in this instance, function as social mechanisms that ensure care and security for women within the community.

Respondent 166 concluded:

“Even though we cannot inherit ancestral property, I do not expect or hope that the current practice will change. We women are looked after, and I am fine with the way things are. I do not wish to jeopardize the foundation and stability of our society by asking for a right that does not belong to us.”

Case Study - 4

Divorced Woman and Access to Ancestral Home

Respondent no.: 16 (Underdeveloped Village)

Age: 62

Marital Status: Divorced

Education: Primary School

Occupation: Self-Employed

During the course of data collection, a single case of divorced respondent was encountered and taken up for further in-depth study, as her circumstances offered valuable insights and perspective into the way of life and inheritance practices in Ao society.

Respondent 16 was from an underdeveloped village and had one son. She was divorced during the early stage of her pregnancy and returned to live with her parents. Reflecting on that period she stated:

“I am a divorcee. I had no job, house or place to live in. I had to move back into my parents’ house. I felt like I became a burden and embarrassment to them, but I had no other option.”

After moving back, she gave birth to a son and continued to live in her parents’ household. She became self-employed to sustain herself and also assisted her parents in cultivating their fields and taking care of the household. Throughout their lives, she and her son remained in the parental home, eventually becoming the primary caregivers for her aging parents. Her mother became paralyzed in 2017 and passed away in 2019, while her father lived until 2022.

Following her father’s death, the land and house where she and her son resided was inherited by her elder brother, the next male kin. At that time, her brother was living in a rented house in Dimapur due to his employment, and he allowed the respondent and her son to continue living in the ancestral home. Later, when her brother was transferred back to Mokokchung, he and his family continued to live in a rented accommodation and did not reclaim the property or went back on his words, maintaining his earlier assurance that the respondent and her son can remain in their parents’ house.

The respondent further noted that even though she has divorced, her son inherited ancestral property from his father’s clan. As such, she explained that while she would continue to reside in her parental home and have access to it for the remainder of her life, her son, belonging to a different clan, would eventually relocate in his own clan land once he gets married.

This case highlights the precarious position of divorced women in relation to clan property inheritance in Ao society. Although the respondent was allowed to remain in her father’s house, ownership and authority over the property

ultimately rested with her male sibling. However, she has been given access to her parent's ancestral property and is being taken care of by her brother. Her experience thus illustrates both the dependence of divorced women on male kin for housing security and also the flexibility of customary practices where family relationships are supportive and women are taken care of.

6.8 Overview

This chapter examines the barriers that hinder women's access to property and inheritance rights in Ao society and evaluates the societal efforts towards enhancing their property rights. It explores how the patriarchal norms, socio-cultural traditions, and customary laws interact with psychological, legal, and structural factors to shape the rights for women and act as barriers to their rights. The chapter also compares the responses from the developed and underdeveloped villages to highlight the similarities and differences in their perspectives towards the barriers and their thoughts to inheritance reform under five thematic headings: 1. Experiences of Discrimination 2. Gender Bias in Property Rights 3. Accessibility Barriers 4. Reforming Tradition 5. Role of government and social society. 6. Focus Group Discussion 7. Case studies and 8. An Overview, with the core findings summarised below:

1. Discrimination and Exclusion: An attempt was made to examine the experiences of discrimination encountered by Ao women when it comes to inheriting property, and the data revealed that:

Only one respondent, a 50-year-old woman from a family with no male siblings from a developed village, personally experienced the denial of her right to inherit her parents' acquired property, illustrating the discriminatory practice as to how gender and patrilineal descent, along with the customary norms, become an obstacle for a woman's right to inherit and the resultant denial. Moreover, This woman exhibited courage to open up about this hard fact, and as such, this type of case may be even more. There were instances of acquaintances being deprived of property, comprising 11 respondents, with 7 from developed villages and 4 from underdeveloped villages. This

occurred largely when the women married outside the tribe or lacked male heirs and the family clan members not agreeing to give land to the women's offspring, stating that 'Land and Buildings cannot be inherited by such women, marrying outside the tribe or lacked male heirs, according to the tradition.' This matches the line of argument of Deere and Doss (2006), that traditional practices grant different rights and privileges for men and women and hinder women's right to inherit property like land.

Moreover, no respondent had ever inherited ancestral property, as customary practices reserve it exclusively for men. Such deprivation was accepted by many as *the old normal* for ancestral property and only contested in cases involving acquired property. Cultural essentialism, clan land symbolism, and fear of a daughter's son at a non-clan household inheriting and owning land within the Ao villages in general were key debates around women's exclusion. Thus, discrimination and denial of rights are recognised mainly in the context of acquired property, while exclusion from ancestral property is unquestionably internalised and hardly viewed as unjust by the majority of Ao women themselves.

- 2. Gender Bias in Property Rights:** In Ao society, as said, gender is the most nuanced phenomenon in the inheritance practice, prejudiced by intricate socio-cultural norms (Hamberg, 2008) and traditional practices with a predisposed preference for men (Rothchild, 2007), sorting women out to a disadvantage. These arguments match with our study findings as presented here under.

A good majority of the respondents, with 76 from underdeveloped villages and 70 from developed villages, acknowledged that they are barred from rights to property due to nothing except being women and interestingly had no obsession to that effect. Those who contended that customary practices, cultural identity and patrilocal residence rather than gender alone (Snood, 2023), drive their exclusion were only 22.5%. Also, women recognised that they do not have the same rights as men and own significantly less property than men, and when they do, it is often smaller

in size or jointly owned with their husbands. Further, very few stated that they had never considered the issue before, stating that they '*don't really care*' and '*do not question it*', highlighting the indisputable internalisation of norms (Hamberg, 2008) and the exclusion as normal rather than discriminatory. The respondents tended to opine that they do not enjoy equal rights as men in land and property, stating that they are secondary when it comes to land. Even in acquired properties, women own less than men or often own jointly with their husbands. Men often hold or receive more because they are men, even in acquired properties (Agarwal et al., 2021). Gender thus becomes a barrier which is systemic, reinforced by cultural beliefs, and accepted as the binding norm, creating both structural and perceptual barriers to inheritance rights in Ao society.

3. **Accessibility Barriers:** Among the respondents, only 21 of them own self-acquired property, and no one owns ancestral property. As such, women reconcile with several visible barriers to access, ownership, control and property inheritance in Ao society, namely: a) socio-cultural barriers, b) governance structure and legal barriers and c) psychological barriers.

- a) **Socio-cultural barriers:** 182 respondents continued to acknowledge that socio-cultural traditions and the dominant role of customary practices act as the primary barrier when it comes to the inheritance of ancestral property by women. In terms of the specific socio-cultural barriers to women's property and inheritance, the items listed by the respondents are customary practices, the symbolic identity of land attached to men, the patrilocal residence system, patriarchal village governance and administration, the conservative social setup and the lack of decision-making power either at the household or at the clan level. A total of 39 respondents listed all of the above factors as barriers to women's property rights, while the remaining 18 respondents, alike from underdeveloped villages and developed villages, while recognising the aforesaid socio-cultural barriers to women's property and inheritance, considered it as a non-issue and were vocal in saying

that ‘nothing can be done about it’. Patriarchy (Rawal & Agarwal, 2016) rules the rust.

The respondents mentioned men always being the ones to lead the society, starting from the household, clan and governance. Patriarchy thus set different roles, rights and privileges for men and women, shaping the family dynamics and power structure in Ao society, and women find it difficult to go against the patriarchal structure, thereby becoming a barrier to their inheritance rights.

- b) **Governance structure and legal barriers:** The legal structure and governance system of Ao society further exacerbate women’s exclusion in the inheritance system. 133 respondents acknowledged that customary law functions as a primary barrier, mentioning that ‘It is the only law they know’ and do not challenge it even though it is discriminatory in nature. The respondents further viewed customary law as men-centric, ‘made by men for men’, reflecting the patriarchal authority within the governance system. Only 5 respondents denied the gender-biasness, arguing that Aos are following our own norms. The remaining 62 respondents were uncertain, considering the practices as normal traditional practice rather than discriminatory. Gender bias in local governance was also identified as a barrier, with the respondents (44.5%) arguing that there is limited power in decision-making with the traditional preference for male leaders (29%), women’s opinions being disregarded (10%) and a combination of all factors (16.5%), creating an environment where the limited participation in the governance and decision-making in Ao society parallels women’s exclusion from the inheritance system.

Cultural tradition superseding formal laws emerged as another concern, with the Rural Development Institute (2009) arguing that formal law becomes entirely meaningless in the face of customary law protected under Article 371 (A) of the Indian Constitution. But only 71 respondents opined that cultural laws dominate over formal laws, while the majority, 129 respondents, stated that they have no idea and that

they do not know anything about what the law says. Rather, they only know what they have been practising. This reflects that women in Ao society are not aware of the legal pluralism, with customary laws effectively overwriting the formal laws in practice (Agarwal, 1994).

Ao women's awareness of their legal rights was also low, with 51.5% of respondents admitting that they have no idea about their legal rights, and a mere 37 respondents from developed and 29 from underdeveloped villages were aware of their legal rights because of higher education and exposure to legal knowledge. The remaining respondents were of the opinion that besides the customary laws which they have seen and grown up with, there are no other legal rights for women to inherit or own property.

The lack of awareness also extends to the practice of writing wills, with only 26 respondents (13%), 17 from developed and 9 from underdeveloped villages, being familiar with writing wills for their daughters to inherit their acquired properties, highlighting a very limited and superficial understanding of legal provisions in reality. The majority (80%) were not aware of writing wills, asking, '*Aji Kechi - What is that?*', while the remaining (7%) stated that the need for writing wills does not arise at all. Campaigns for awareness of legal rights by women's organisations were also stark, with only 23.5% of respondents, mostly from developed villages, having heard of such initiatives. The majority 64.5% of respondents were not aware of it, and the remaining respondents stated that they were unsure whether such initiatives existed at all or not. All these local governances and legal structures thus become a barrier to women's right to inherit property under the dominance of patriarchal customary laws and negligible level of legal awareness in Ao society.

- c) **Psychological Barriers:** Besides the socio-cultural and legal barriers, women encounter psychological barriers that limit their ability to claim or exercise their inheritance rights, deeply rooted in gender roles, internalised beliefs, traditional customs and limited legal knowledge

(Verma & Narwal, 2024). Fear of backlash emerged as a major psychological barrier, with 71 respondents from developed villages and 62 from underdeveloped villages acknowledging that they refrain from making claims to property because they know that they do not have any rights to it and have the fear that going against the practices would bring or result in facing backlash, sanctions, and social labelling, a finding consistent with Agarwal (2003), Bosuben (2018), and Rekha Madhana & Yaseen Waseema (2018). Only 19 respondents dismissed that there is no such thing as the fear of going against the practices, as people do not even think of going against the practices. The remaining 48 respondents (24%) were reluctant to acknowledge the fear, which highlighted an internal conflict between latent discomfort and normative conformity.

Challenges faced by women were also recognised, with the majority (90.5%) of respondents agreeing that women face more challenges than men in asserting their rights because of the different socio-cultural and psychological constraints. 106 respondents also recognised that lack of property increases the vulnerability of women. However, 11 respondents from underdeveloped villages opined that women should rightfully demand a share in property, while the majority of 63 respondents in developed villages were opposed to it. Rather, emphasis was stressed on education and employment over property as more sustainable forms of empowerment.

Thus, the dominance of socio-cultural norms, patriarchy, customary law, low legal literacy, minimal awareness of writing wills or rights, and psychological barriers such as the fear of going against the practices even though they are discriminatory all interact and create a multi-layered system that becomes a barrier and hinders women's right to inherit or own property in Ao society.

- 4. Reforming tradition:** Despite the barriers to women's right to inherit property, only 86 respondents opined that property inheritance rights are necessary for women, with respondents from underdeveloped villages (46)

sharing this perspective more compared to developed villages (40), stating that property can provide sustenance, bargaining ability, and status and determine their economic independence, and it also becomes essential when one is unemployed or has fewer opportunities. While 92 respondents, with the majority from developed villages (53) compared to (39) from underdeveloped villages rejected the notion that property inheritance rights are necessary for women. Such a move is seen as a threat to the cultural identity and traditional practices of the society. Moreover, only 64 respondents believed that there is a need for inheritance reform, which was influenced by the modern ideals of equality and questioning the discrimination. While the majority 108 respondents expressed opposition, reflecting a strong commitment to the traditional inheritance norms, stating that there is a reason behind the prevailing practice and that women should not demand the rights to ancestral properties. Thus, while the voices for change are increasing, it is still overshadowed and constrained by cultural identity, fear of repercussions, and internalised societal norms. The hesitation to bring change and reform stems not only from adhering to the tradition but also because of its cultural legitimacy and a complicated relationship of identity, continuation and modern ideals of equality.

5. **Role of Government and Civil Society Organisations:** The respondents recognised the importance of government and CSOs in promoting equality and awareness for inheritance rights of women in Ao society, and opined that awareness can come from the understanding of the laws, which have been translated to local languages instead of English or Hindi, which is in line with the findings of Gooneskere (2004) and Bhatla et al. (2006). However, its practical impact is limited by entrenched customary practices, with 38.5% of respondents opining that there is reluctance on the part of different organisations and the government to address the issues of women's property rights, especially when it concerns ancestral properties. The respondents thus called for translating laws into local languages, increasing awareness through media and community discussions, and focusing on securing women's rights in acquired property as a realistic

starting point, with the civil society organisations serving as vital intermediaries between the state and the community.

6. **Focus Group Discussion:** The FGD was held with the District Dobashi Customary Law Court, with 14 members present during the discussion. The members asserted that variations in cultural practices would arise since every Ao village is its own republic, but land across Ao society is not inherited by women. The members also stressed that the Ao society is patriarchal, but, however, even men cannot do according to their own will on clan lands. Emphasis was also placed on not basing the inheritance practice on contemporary understandings but on its cultural relevance. Moreover, the members of the Customary Law Court collectively dismissed women's claim to ancestral property rights and emphasised the rigidity of the inheritance practice. The impact of bringing in change would result in losing homogeneity and creating chaos within the traditions and identity of the Aos.
7. **Case study:** At the end of the chapter, four case studies were highlighted. The first case study is about an intestate succession dispute of a respondent who faced discrimination and exclusion from inheriting her parents' property. The paternal uncles denied the rights to the respondent and the justification given was the customary practice and inheritance norms are a male right and married daughters cannot inherit land, as it would transfer to another clan through their offspring. This highlights how deep-rooted cultural practices and marital status continue to obstruct women's land rights even when it comes to acquired properties. The next case studies were about the case of two unmarried women under different circumstances and a divorcee who were given the privilege and the usufructuary rights to their parent's ancestral property and clan lands. These case studies on the other hand highlighted that even though the inheritance practices may be discriminatory in nature, and even though instances arise where women are discriminated, customary practices are flexible and family relationships are supportive where women are taken care of and looked after in the society.

The next chapter presents the summary and conclusion of the thesis where the sociological implications of the study and future areas of research are mapped out.

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CHAPTER VII

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

7.1 Introduction

7.2 Socio-economic Profile

7.3 Ownership Status, Control and Decision-Making

7.4 Barriers to Women's Access to Property

7.5 Developed and Underdeveloped Villages in Context

7.6 Sociological Implications of the Study

7.7 Future Areas for Research

CHAPTER VII

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

7.0 Introduction

Property, in all of its forms, is regarded and recognised as the primary asset or key element in determining and enhancing a person's socioeconomic standing in all societies. But not only do men and women have different access to the properties, women have historically faced greater challenges to obtain equal inheritance rights due to firmly established cultural practices, legislative limits, and patriarchal norms. These barriers vary differently across different regions and societies, reflecting diverse social, political, economic, and historical contexts. Traditional norms and practices favour men when it comes to inheritance, especially with regard to land, which is tied to male lineage and authority. In tribal societies, the kinship system and customary laws further reinforce the exclusion of women from inheritance rights. This is evident in the case of the Ao Naga women who do not have the right to inherit ancestral property. As the world strives for gender equality, this study on 'Property Inheritance Rights of Ao Naga Women' engages with the question of why Ao Naga women are not allowed to inherit ancestral property and how they perceive this exclusion. The study thus provides a broader understanding of the property inheritance through a gendered lens, which is divided into 7 chapters. It examines the socio-economic profile of Ao women, their ownership status, control and decision-making, and the barriers they face in claiming their inheritance rights. The study further highlights the thoughts and perspectives of Ao women on the prevailing inheritance practice and the role that NGOs and civil societies can play in addressing the issue. By doing so, this study seeks to situate the local reality within the discussion on gender, customary law, and property inheritance rights, thereby contributing to an understanding of Ao women's position within the wider global context.

Chapter I consists of the introduction of the study, while Chapter II deals with the review of literature. Chapter III covers the methodological framework of

the study, and Chapter IV delves into the socio-economic profile of the sampled respondents. Chapter V examines the Ownership status, control and decision-making of Ao women when it comes to properties and Chapter VI deals with the Barriers to their inheritance rights and the role that NGO's and Civil societies can do to address the issue, while Chapter VII summed up the study towards contextualising and conclusion.

In chapter I, a general introduction of the study has been done under seven headings, introducing the concept of property, which is taken as land for this study, and understanding the terms such as 'tribe' and 'gender' and their intersection. Tribal societies have unique political systems, family bonds, kinship ties and communal land tenure systems. They also have typical gender divisions and cultural norms associated with gender, assigning different rights and privileges. This intersection of tribe and gender is intricate, and the exclusion of women's rights, such as property inheritance, often reinforces gender inequality, limiting their economic independence and perpetuating subordinate social positions within their society. This relationship gets more complicated with the prevalence of customary laws and traditional practices. In tribal societies, the customary law is essential for shaping the social fabric; however, it maintains gender hierarchies and disparities, which is especially true when it comes to land and its inheritance. All these gender norms and customary laws in tribal societies are influenced by patriarchy, often perpetuated through the existing customs, traditions and beliefs, frequently limiting women's rights and opportunities. Besides that, in this first chapter, under the heading 'Gender and Property Inheritance', the intersection of customary laws, societal norms, gender expectations and patriarchy, which affects women's right to property and inheritance, highlights the inheritance practices and women's rights of the global scenario, the national, the northeast and finally the Ao Naga inheritance practice, where Ao women neither have the right to own property nor inherit it. Therefore, the 'Property Inheritance Rights of Ao Naga Women' has been carried forward.

Chapter II concerns the review of literature for the study, focusing particularly on women's right to inherit property and its related issues. The literature reviewed has been divided into three headings: Theoretical Perspectives; Methodological Review and concluding with Thematic Reviews. The theoretical perspectives consist of six theories: the gender theory of inheritance, kinship theories of descent and alliance, social exchange theory, symbolic interactionism, conflict perspective and the human rights approach. All these theoretical perspectives reviewed and utilised in the study provide a greater understanding of gendered inheritance practice and contextualise the findings of the study from a theoretical perspective.

The Gender Theory of Inheritance postulates how a women's gender affects her rights because of patriarchal traditions, socio-cultural norms and traditional practices that marginalise women in society. The kinship theory of descent and alliance highlights why patriarchal inheritance developed and how the kinship and marriage practices perpetuate patriarchy and gender difference and how lineage, status and group cohesion are maintained in a society. Social exchange and symbolic interactionism further point out that because of unfair exchange as a result of the symbolic meaning attached to land, inheritance rights are shaped, and this leads to conflict where the conflict perspective highlights how inheritance becomes a male privilege of power and scarce resources. The human rights-based approach further highlights the policy recommendations and equal rights-based advocacy. But despite its prevalence and various international and national policies and efforts, Ao women still internalise the inheritance practice, opining that only men should have the right to inherit property, perpetuating their exclusion themselves. These theoretical perspectives thereby provide a foundation and helped in understanding the study more clearly.

Under the Methodological Review, the methods and techniques applied by previous researchers on similar themes have been examined to help in formulating the methodological framework of the study. The previous researchers have utilised several qualitative and quantitative approaches, which

have been proven effective, and as such, the current study employs descriptive and exploratory research design, exploratory comparative analysis, interview schedules, case studies, key informant interviews and focus group discussions. Thus, the study is largely qualitative in nature, and need-based quantitative data have been used to supplement and enrich the study.

The thematic review was classified into eight, which are property rights and gender; women and land ownership; female bargaining power; family conflict over inheritance of properties; barriers to women's property inheritance; women and property inheritance in customary laws; legal dimensions and property inheritance; and lastly, women's inheritance under MDGs and SDGs. The different themes reviewed offer an insight into the property rights of women, the benefits of such rights, the barriers or obstacles to such rights, the conflict involved and also the legal dimensions related to such rights and practices. This in turn helped in identifying the key concepts to be used and concluded the chapter with the research gap identified for the present study.

Chapter III lays down the methodological framework adopted and the procedures and techniques followed in the study. It started with the Objectives for the study, followed by the Research Design to Operationalisation of Concepts, the Universe and Sample selection, the principle of exclusion and inclusion and the sources of data. It further entails the research experience and data collection, the data analysis, the research ethics followed and the limitations of the study.

Based on the research gap identified, the study proceeded with the following objectives:

1. To understand the nature of inheritance of Ao Naga women.
2. To analyse the socio-economic profile of women in Ao society.
3. To examine and compare the status of Ao women in developed and underdeveloped villages in terms of property ownership.
4. To study the factors that act as barriers and impede women's access to inheritance of properties.

5. To examine the societal efforts enhancing women's standing on property inheritance.

The present study thus follows a descriptive cum exploratory and comparative research design, with Mokokchung District as the universe for the purpose of this study. For selecting the sample, the study employs a non-probability and purposive sampling technique to select a total of 50 households each from four villages, leading to a total sample of 200 respondents to carry out household surveys, broadly representing the universe of the study. For the selection of the four villages, a multi-stage quota sampling process was employed. In the first stage, two sub-divisions were identified from the four sub-divisions and classified into a developed and underdeveloped subdivision. In the second stage, four administrative circles were identified from the two selected subdivisions. On the third stage, four villages were identified and termed as developed and underdeveloped villages. Ungma and Mopungchuket as developed villages and Khar and Molungkimong as underdeveloped villages.

Besides the 200 sampled respondents, 20 key informants were identified purposively and interviewed to get deeper insights because of their intimate knowledge and experience on the issue. 15 key informants were females, while the remaining five were male respondents to facilitate the male perspective as well. Moreover, 15 of them hold respectable government jobs as professors and academicians, and a few were actively participating as members of the Watsu Mungdang, two were advocates, two were church workers, and lastly, there was an eminent writer and editor of the local newspaper.

The data for the study was mainly primary data collected through interview schedules, KII and FGDs. Upon the completion of the fieldwork, the schedules collected were scrutinised, and coding was done for the quantitative data, which was then analysed through SPSS. The qualitative data obtained have been used as narratives and quotations which are phenomenological and ethnographic in nature. The chapter concludes by discussing the research ethics that were followed and the limitations encountered during the study.

7.2 Socio-economic Profile

This study's Chapter IV focusses on identifying the socio-economic profile of Ao women in Mokokchung District, Nagaland. The variables analysed in this chapter include age, marital status, family type, size of the household, dependent family members, type of accommodation, household assets owned, religious denomination, educational qualifications, employment status, income and lastly the size of the land owned.

In terms of age, respondents between the ages of 41 and 50 years were more in developed villages, while in underdeveloped villages respondents were more from the age group of 50 and above. This group of respondents, who were 40 and above, were in their peak earning period, more settled with their family income and socioeconomic activities, and few could acquire properties jointly with their husbands or on their own. Moreover, in both the developed and underdeveloped villages, the age group of 21–30 years comprises the least number of respondents and does not own any acquired properties, as this age group does not have the means or the income to acquire properties, nor could they inherit any ancestral or clan properties. This age distribution reflects not only potential socio-economic differences but also has its effects on the marital status as well.

Regarding the marital status, the majority of the women from both the developed and underdeveloped villages were married, as among the households selected, most of the respondents interviewed were either wives or mothers. Apart from the married respondents, there were three respondents from underdeveloped villages and one from a developed village who were of marriageable age but remained unmarried and were considered spinsters. A single case of a divorced respondent from an underdeveloped village is also included in this study, and there were 41 respondents who were single at the time of the study and were not involved in any romantic relationship. Notably, none of the unmarried, divorced or single women respondents did not own any property. Widowed respondents were also present, with eight respondents from

developed villages and 11 from underdeveloped villages. Among them, four had acquired property jointly with their late husband. However, the majority of property owners were married respondents, who had combined their income and resources with their spouses to acquire property, a process which is more challenging for other marital categories (Grinstein-Weiss et al., 2011).

The respondents and households interviewed for the study belonged to nuclear families, reflecting the cultural norms of Ao society, where after the marriage the newly married couple often starts their own family away from their parents, contributing to the prevalence of nuclear family structure. Household size also ranged from a single-member to eight-member families, with four-member households being the most common, with 39 from developed and 30 households from underdeveloped villages. Thus, the size of the family is typically on a smaller frame, with the husband, wife and two offspring as the most common among the Aos. With regard to the number of dependent family members within the household, it varied from zero to seven family members, with families having two dependents accounting for the largest group of 78 households (41 developed and 37 underdeveloped). Furthermore, the Nagas and Aos in general follow a patrilineal system, which reinforces and perpetuates patriarchal norms and attitudes that negatively impact women's social status (Nukshirenla & Dhanaraju, 2021). In the context of the present study, it was also observed that none of the women respondents were recognised as heads of their household. Instead, this role was always held by the husbands or fathers.

The respondents' living arrangements and housing conditions varied between Kuccha, Semi Pucca and Pucca houses, as well as between the developed and underdeveloped villages. Respondents with kuccha houses were more in underdeveloped villages as compared to developed villages, while the majority of the respondents from both developed and underdeveloped villages resided in semi-pucca houses with 129 households. However, respondents living in pucca houses were more from developed villages (22) as compared to 16 respondents from underdeveloped villages. The type of accommodation directly reflects the

respondent's socioeconomic standing, with respondents in kuccha dwellings are often known to encounter greater financial difficulties, limiting their access to resources and properties. In contrast, residents dwelling in pucca houses seem to have better economic stability and, as such, greater access to different amenities. Notably, the dominance of semi-pucca houses highlights the transitional nature of families striving to improve both their living and economic conditions.

Household assets owned also provided insights into the socio-economic conditions of the respondents. The household assets included televisions, mobile phones, refrigerators, washing machines, gas/induction stoves, computers/laptops and livestock owned. Assets like mobile phones were universally owned by all of the respondents primarily out of necessity, while gas stoves were owned by 184 households. Ownership of assets like televisions, refrigerators, washing machines and computers/laptops varied significantly, with households from developed villages owning more of these items as compared to underdeveloped villages. However, when it comes to owning livestock, 77 households from underdeveloped villages reared livestock such as pigs and hens, compared to 25 households in developed villages, reflecting different economic priorities and lifestyles. Livestock provides income, food, and security in underdeveloped villages, playing a crucial role in subsistence living, while households in developed regions have better access to alternative resources and employment opportunities, explaining the variations in asset ownership.

Nagaland and AOs in general are predominantly Christian-dominated state. The study reflected this fact, with all respondents identifying as Baptists. The influence of religion extends beyond spiritual life to education and social development. In the case of the AO community, American Baptist missionaries promoted and emphasised the value of education as a means for personal and community development, thereby influencing their socio-economic standing as well. Moreover, in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Durkheim (1915) contends that religion stems from clan loyalty and identity. Religion's

rituals and ceremonies serve to reinforce the communal bonds and shared identities. This perspective aligns with the inheritance practice of the Aos, where land functions as an important symbol of clan solidarity and identity. Similar to religious activities, attachment to ancestral land reflects a collective conscience and acts as a unifying force within the community. Land inheritance governed by customary laws not only maintains the social fabric but also reflects the cultural identity of the Ao people.

In terms of education, the data indicated that the educational level of the respondents is quite high, with respondents having their high school, higher secondary school and graduate degrees. However, graduates were more in developed villages, while the ones with the high school degrees were more in underdeveloped villages. The benefits of improved infrastructure and access to educational facilities showed their impact in the developed villages. In contrast, underdeveloped villages reflect structural hurdles such as economic and geographical challenges and proper infrastructure for higher academic progression. There were also 12 post-graduates among the respondents and one with a Ph.D. degree from a developed village in this study. Overall, the educational level of the respondents is quite high, with the educational qualification having a significant impact on the socio-economic outcomes.

109 respondents were found to be employed, with a higher proportion coming from developed villages as compared to underdeveloped villages. Similarly, students who were currently studying were also more from developed villages, as such villages had more respondents available who could be interviewed and were currently pursuing their graduate and postgraduate degrees, due to the availability of colleges and universities close to them facilitating their access to higher education. 78 respondents were seen to be unemployed, and among those, the respondents were more from underdeveloped villages again. They were mostly housewives dependent on their husbands or doing menial work to earn something. This higher unemployment rate in underdeveloped villages reflects the socio-economic issues these communities face, such as limited work opportunities, lower educational attainment and access, and reliance on

subsistence farming and informal labour markets, further underscoring the economic disparities.

Among those 109 respondents who were employed, 49 were in government jobs, 25 were in private enterprises, and the remaining 35 were self-employed. Notably, in all three employment categories, there were more respondents from developed villages than from underdeveloped ones. Moreover, private sector and employment remain a pillar of economic stability and employment in both developed and underdeveloped villages, providing financial security and social benefits. Self-employment also provides an alternative for many households, particularly in underdeveloped villages where employment prospects are limited. All these employment opportunities and the income as a subsequent result of it determine a woman's opportunity and the only possible way to acquire properties, either on their own or along with their spouses, as Ao women do not have any right to inherit ancestral clan properties.

In terms of income, it was classified into seven categories, ranging from below ₹10,000 to ₹51,000 and above. Notably, the modal income, or the most prevalent income bracket, falls within ₹21,000-₹30,000 per month amongst 46 respondents, representing middle-income earners, including individuals employed in low-level government jobs or the private sector, and some self-employed entrepreneurs. Only one single respondent from an underdeveloped village was seen to be earning less than ₹10,000 per month. The next income range (₹11,000-₹20,000) accounted for 32 respondents, who were primarily self-employed with traditional livelihoods such as farming, small-scale businesses, and handicrafts or informal jobs. The income brackets of ₹31,000-₹40,000 and ₹41,000-₹50,000 each accounted for 12 respondents, with developed villages being more (7 respondents) as compared to underdeveloped villages (5 respondents) in both the income categories. The highest income bracket, (₹51,000 and above), with only six respondents, five from developed villages and only one from an underdeveloped village. These respondents typically belong to households with greater financial stability, who earn their income primarily through higher-level government jobs. Overall, the monthly

income distribution of the respondents reveals significant economic disparities between the developed and underdeveloped villages. Developed villages have a higher concentration of respondents in the middle- and upper-income groups, indicating greater access to steady and lucrative employment opportunities. In contrast, underdeveloped villages are characterised by lower-income households and a higher frequency of unemployment, emphasising the lack of opportunities and amenities available to them.

The respondents' marital status shaped stark differences in the family income distribution. Married respondents formed the majority (135 individuals), with a significant proportion (79 respondents) falling within the medium-income bracket of ₹21,000–₹50,000. Interestingly, underdeveloped villages accounted for more married individuals in this income range. On the other hand, married respondents belonging to the high-income category (above ₹51,000) were predominantly more in developed villages. In contrast, unmarried, widowed, divorced, and single respondents exhibited greater financial vulnerability. Among unmarried individuals, most of the respondents fall within the medium-income range, and the widowed respondents were predominantly concentrated in the low-income bracket, with none in the high-income category, highlighting the economic precarity faced by women without spousal support. Moreover, the sole divorced respondent also falls within the low-income group, further illustrating the challenges faced by women in this category. Single respondents and the income of their families, however, showed a more balanced distribution, with the majority of their families in the medium-income range. Thus, developed villages in Mokokchung District and among the Aos consistently demonstrate better income outcomes across all marital categories, while underdeveloped villages reflect higher instances of financial hardship. All these income patterns have a direct implication for land ownership.

In terms of land ownership, only 21 women reported owning land, with 17 respondents from developed villages and only four from underdeveloped villages having acquired properties. Notably, none of the respondents reported

owning ancestral clan land, which reflects the traditional practice and the inheritance system of the Ao Nagas that prohibits women from inheriting or holding ancestral and clan land. Instead, the women have acquired their properties by purchasing them or through other means, indicating that land ownership among the women in Ao society is primarily a result of individual economic efforts rather than that of inheritance. Moreover, the disparity in land ownership among respondents from developed and underdeveloped villages results from socio-economic differences, such as education, employment, and income, as stated by Katz and Chamorro (2003), which play a vital role in the ability to acquire property.

Doss et al. (2015) stated that women are five times less likely than men to own land, and even if they own land, it is often smaller in size. This study also shows that among the landowners, the size of the land owned was rather small as well. The land holdings varied from less than *1 Bigha* to *3 Bighas*, with *1 Bigha* approximately equal to 14,400 square feet (1,337.8 square meters). Notably, a landholding size of *1 Bigha*, with 11 respondents, was the most common size of the land owned, with eight of these respondents from developed villages and three from underdeveloped villages. Ownership of land larger than *1 Bigha* decreased significantly, with only five respondents owning *2 Bighas* and just one respondent owning *3 Bighas of land*, all of whom are from developed villages. Additionally, four respondents owned less than *1 Bigha*, with three respondents from developed villages and only one from an underdeveloped village. The size of land owned not only served as a significant indicator of the economic standing and access to essential resources, but also highlights the differences in landholdings among women landowners themselves as well as the differences between the developed and underdeveloped villages. This dominance of non-landowners in both developed and underdeveloped villages, as well as the smaller size of land owned, highlights the larger issues of gender inequality in land ownership and property inheritance in Ao Naga society.

7.3 Ownership Status, Control and Decision-Making

The property ownership status of women in Ao Naga society and its control and decision-making aspects is highlighted in Chapter V. This chapter examined the complexities of inheritance practice through a gendered lens, focusing on how traditional practices, societal attitudes, and customary laws shape the inheritance practices and rights of women in Ao society. By comparing the disparities and challenges between developed and underdeveloped villages, this chapter provided a deeper understanding of women's status regarding the property ownership. As such, the perspectives, thoughts, and opinions of Ao Naga women from the sampled villages were explored under 6 themes, which are: 1. Property Ownership Status; 2. Factors Influencing Property Ownership; 3. Distribution and Control of Property; 4. Property Rights and Gender; 5. Conflict over Property Rights; and 6. Decision-Making and Empowerment.

In terms of property ownership status, only 21 out of 200 respondents (17 from developed and 4 from underdeveloped villages) owned property. Notably, the properties they owned were self-acquired property rather than ancestral clan properties. This clearly indicated that women in Ao society are restricted from owning ancestral clan properties, and it aligns with the works of Agarwal (2003), Allendorf (2007) and Alkire et al. (2013), who stated that women face persistent discrimination in access to land throughout different societies. The narrative of Respondent 17 from an underdeveloped village helps to understand this:

“In our society, women do neither own nor even think about inheriting ancestral properties. These rights are reserved for men alone, whether we want it or not. Our norms and traditional values are attached to it and this has been practised and handed down for generations.”

Moreover, among the property owners, the type of property they owned included land along with buildings and different household assets. The

respondents had acquired those properties either by inheriting their parents' acquired properties or through their personal financial efforts and capabilities, enabling them to construct their homes and purchase essential belongings. In contrast to the minority who owned property, it was found that the greater majority of 179 respondents, 83 from developed villages and 96 from underdeveloped villages, did not own any property at all. This inequality draws attention to the ingrained socio-economic and cultural barriers that prevent women in Ao society from having access to ancestral properties.

When it comes to the factors that influence property ownership in Ao society, the different means through which the respondents have acquired their property, specifically, the process of acquisition, eligibility criteria, and determinants of ownership, were examined and explored. The means through which the respondents have acquired their property in Ao society was primarily through purchase, being given through a will, or by being permitted to own or utilise the property. Notably, the most common means of acquiring land was by purchasing it, accounting for 15 respondents (13 from developed and 2 from underdeveloped). three respondents (1 from a developed and 2 from underdeveloped villages) reported owning property through permission. Ao women cannot own or inherit ancestral properties, but they are granted temporary rights to land under certain conditions, such as widowhood, and these rights remain conditional and do not translate into actual ownership. As such, the three respondents were given temporary rights to own the property through permission, which is often rare. Moreover, the remaining three respondents, which were all from developed villages, had acquired their properties by inheriting their parents' acquired properties through a will. These accounts help to understand how properties are acquired by women in Ao society, emphasising that ownership is often achieved through purchase rather than inheritance. The key factor that enabled the means to acquire the property was economic independence, particularly personal income, which played a significant role for six respondents from developed villages. Beyond the personal income, marital status along with their income played the greatest role

on property acquisition for nine respondents, with seven respondents from developed villages and two from underdeveloped villages, highlighting that their marriages enabled them to pool resources and acquire property jointly with their husbands. Thus, while personal income allows some women to evade restrictive customary practices and acquire properties on their own, marriage and economic collaboration with their spouses play an equally crucial role in enabling access to property.

Eligibility to own ancestral property in Ao society is often dependent on kinship status, family relations, and patriarchy. These conditions usually place women at a disadvantage, making it difficult for them to own or inherit properties. In the case of this study, the husbands of the respondents (135), their fathers (45), their sons (19), and a nephew were the ones who were eligible to own the ancestral properties. Men automatically have ownership rights over ancestral land by virtue of them being men and members of the clan, and it shows a universal consensus on gender disparity, as no Ao women were considered to be eligible to own ancestral property. A key informant commented:

“We cannot always blame negatively about our Sobaliba (Ao traditions, customs and ethical values). There are some good and some bad practices. But when it comes to inheritance, only men have the right to ancestral properties. I strongly stand and agree with that. As a result of the prevailing practice, our lineage, traditions and practices are maintained and remain unaltered. Because of it we have a very clean Sobaliba.”

These perspectives highlighted that the eligibility to own ancestral property in Ao society is significantly influenced by marital and kinship relations, as well as the patriarchal nature of Ao society, where property ownership is tied to male lineage and traditional social norms of the society.

When it comes to the elements that determine the nature of ownership, the study observed that the majority of the respondents (144) hold a predominant

perspective on clan, descent, and patriarchal frameworks working together to determine the ownership rights in Ao society. This highlights the deep-rooted influence of traditional inheritance systems that prioritise collective familial affiliations and male-centred property transmission. Respondent 40 from a developed village simply stated:

“It has been the practice since our forefathers. Clan land or property is with men, and the privilege or right remains with their descendants who are men.”

In contrast, 17 respondents attributed it solely to clan, while 15 attributed it to patriarchy, opining that these elements work independently rather than in conjunction with each other. Remarkably, respondents from underdeveloped villages emphasised these factors more compared to respondents from developed villages. Respondent 11 from an underdeveloped village mentioned:

“There is no individual ownership of land. It is community and clan-based ownership, and parents do not have the right to let their daughters inherit those properties, as only male descendants of the clan can inherit it. I believe that is the only reason we women do not inherit land.”

Beside those perspectives, 24 respondents believed that property ownership is instead determined by a combination of descent, marriage, and self-acquisition. While still less significant than the dominant determinants, this group of respondents reflects a growing recognition of individual property acquisition through marriage and personal efforts, indicating a shift towards more flexible ownership determinants rather than depending on ancestral property. Respondent 51 from a developed village stated that she acquired property jointly with her husband:

“I have seen cases where women acquire property through marriage or personal earnings. While traditional norms still influence inheritance, factors such as our income and marriage

offer more opportunities for independent land ownership. I personally own a plot of land jointly that I acquired with my husband, something that wouldn't have been possible in the traditional inheritance practices.”

Overall, the study highlights the predominant role of clan, descent, patriarchy and customary practices in determining the ownership rights to property in Ao society, reflecting a widely accepted belief that property ownership is a culturally driven practice sustained across generations.

The study examined the distribution and control of property, focussing on the basis of entitlement to inheritance, how property is distributed, and who controls it, to gain a better understanding of how property is inherited and managed in Ao society. For the basis of entitlement to inheritance, the majority of 158 respondents recognised the role of clan and lineage as the primary basis for inheritance rights. The study thus highlights the deep-rooted tradition of collective ownership of land in Ao society, where inheritance is not an individual entitlement but rather a structured transmission of property within familial and clan members. Gender as an independent determinant of inheritance rights was also observed in the study, with 38 respondents sharing this perspective. The respondents of the study opined that gender, or being born as a male or female in society, plays a crucial role in deciding one's entitlement to inheritance, even before the lineage or clan considerations come into play. Thus, the study observes the resilience of the traditional inheritance practices, where the combined factors of clan and lineage as well as gender remain the predominant determinants of property transmission and its entitlement to inherit it. Accordingly, property distribution within the Ao community is male-centric, with 179 respondents opining that the ancestral property in Ao society is primarily distributed via inheritance through the male offspring, emphasising that inheritance is the primary mode of property distribution.

When it comes to the controller of properties, they were classified into ancestral and acquired properties. In terms of ancestral properties, the husbands (135), fathers (44), sons (20) and brothers (1) were in control. This reveals the patriarchal nature of Ao society, where the male family members hold a dominant position in owning, inheriting, and controlling the ancestral clan properties. The study also highlighted that, in the case of widowed or divorced women, the control of property typically does not go directly to the wife, but to her male children instead, and takes on the role of property controllers, emphasising the traditional customs of lineage-based inheritance system. In terms of acquired property, it was observed that there is a prevalence of joint ownership and control, with 15 respondents (13 from developed and 2 from underdeveloped) sharing this, and it was opined that even in cases where land is obtained through personal effort, it is often shared with a male spouse rather than independently owned and controlled. Only three respondents from developed villages stated that they control their properties individually. Thus, the study observes that the distribution and control of property within Ao society are deeply rooted in traditional practices, with clan, lineage, and gender being the key factors determining ownership rights. The fathers, husbands, and sons, or men in general, typically own and control the ancestral properties, and even within acquired properties, it is more common for women to share ownership with their marital partners rather than owning and controlling the properties independently.

Under property rights and gender, the equal distribution of resources; preference for male heirs; societal norms dominating inheritance practices; patriarchal property abuse; and the consequences that arise as a result of not adhering to the norms were examined and explored. When it comes to the equality in resource distribution, Deere and Doss (2006) point out that there is a significant gender gap in land ownership. The study also found that an overwhelming majority of 176 respondents opined that resources are not distributed equally among men and women in Ao society, reinforcing the deeply rooted patriarchal framework that governs the inheritance practices as

stated by Kaushik (2007). Moreover, the respondents also opined that even among men, the eldest gets the first choice and the privilege (Maine, 1861), or that some clans have more land while others have less. Notably, nine respondents opined that resources are distributed equally in the society, with slightly more responses from underdeveloped villages (7) compared to developed ones (2). This shows that, although rare, some individuals believe that the community engages in equitable practices. However, such cases remain minimal, making them exceptions rather than indicative of the broader societal practice and perception.

A universal preference for male inheritance has also been observed in the study supporting the work of Bhalotra et al. (2020), with all 200 respondents (100%) from both developed and undeveloped villages agreeing on this practice, which emphasises the deep-rooted patriarchal norms and their influence on the perception and practice of inheritance in Ao society. Thus, the study also emphasised on examining whether men and societal norms dominated women in the inheritance practice, and it was observed that the majority of 160 respondents (80%) feel that societal norms and male dominance shape the inheritance practices in Ao society. Respondent 118 from an underdeveloped village noted that:

“For us, inheritance has never been an issue. Since descent and property follow male lines, there has been no need to discuss women inheriting land. It is not discrimination but an accepted practice.”

This clearly paints a picture of the rigid and exclusionary inheritance system in Ao Naga society, where male inheritance is a deeply institutionalised practice reinforced by societal beliefs, cultural narratives, and historical relevance, with women themselves perpetuating and continuing the practice.

In contrast to Griffiths (2002), who writes that men misuse their control over family property, the majority of the respondents from the study believed that there is no such misuse or abuse of property. Only 15 respondents, five from

developed and ten from underdeveloped villages, opined that men abuse the property. Respondent 132 from an underdeveloped village stated:

“In our village, men alone control the property absolutely. While we don’t always call it abuse, the reality is that it is their right alone.”

This quote encapsulated the perception of patriarchal property control, reflecting how exclusion is seen as normal rather than as an issue of fairness. However, the low acknowledgement of abuse does not necessarily indicate an absence of abuse but rather a societal reluctance to recognise it as problematic, due to the acceptance of inheritance practices as customary rather than abusive. This can be seen in the instance where the considerable majority of 154 respondents opined that they have not encountered patriarchal property abuse. The widespread rejection of patriarchal property abuse reinforces the idea that traditional property inheritance, male-dominated land ownership, and its practices are normalised rather than seen as exploitative.

When it comes to the negative sanctions, a notable 180 respondents (90%) affirmed that deviating from societal norms results in negative repercussions or sanctions. This emphasises the strong cultural focus on adhering to traditional practices and highlights how acceptance and conformity to these norms, despite their discriminatory nature, are deeply rooted in the fabric of Ao society. The rigidity of social norms and the community’s strong disapproval for deviation, particularly in contexts related to gender roles, inheritance practices, and the advocacy of rights, thus results in sanctions being imposed.

An attempt was also made to understand the conflicts that arise over property rights. However, it was observed that only one respondent from a developed village experienced conflicts over property rights. A 50-year-old woman from a family with no male siblings experienced an ‘intestate succession dispute of parents’ acquired property’ and highlighted how gender and marital status, along with the customary norms, become an obstacle for a woman’s right to inherit, even in the case of acquired property.

In terms of siblings' disputes over inheritance, the majority of 170 respondents (85%) rather felt that such conflicts do not occur between siblings, indicating that traditional inheritance customs, which prioritise male succession, are widely accepted. However, 20 respondents, 13 from developed and seven from underdeveloped villages, opined that disputes do occur when there is unequal or unfair distribution of the parents' acquired properties. Emphasis was also laid on examining whether problems arise in families due to lack of property, and 184 respondents reported that they do not face any such issues within their families, with similar feedback from respondents of both developed and underdeveloped villages. Respondent 59 from a developed village mentioned:

“This is how things have always been for us. Men inherit and own the land, and women are taken care of by men. I don't think it causes any problems in the family. Economic problems, lack of respect or security whatever it maybe it cannot be solved just by owning a piece of land.”

On the matter of escalation of violence when women demand equal rights to ancestral property, 130 respondents (65%) felt that violence would indeed escalate when women challenge societal norms, supporting the work of Izuhara and Koppe (2019). This indicates that patriarchal dominance is so deeply rooted in Ao society that confronting these systems would encounter strict resistance. Additionally, a larger number of 167 respondents (83.5%) believed that advocating for women's equal rights tends to escalate conflicts within families. Women asserting their rights is frequently viewed as a challenge to the established patriarchal authority, and they face more resistance from within the family itself rather than the society in general. Ao women thereby face a direct threat of violence when they advocate or stand for equal rights to ancestral clan properties, highlighting the hostile social environment that leaves no space to go against the customary practices in Ao society. Property disputes also have far-reaching consequences, leading to social exclusion, emotional turmoil, and, in some cases, violence and societal backlash. The study thereby highlights that inheritance disputes involve complex emotional,

social, and cultural beliefs, and the deep entanglement of property with power, identity, and local governance. This makes it difficult to implement legal reforms without engaging with the traditional institutions, which are also safeguarded and protected under Article 371-A of the Indian Constitution.

Decision-making and empowerment as a result of owning property were also examined. However, only 6 respondents from developed villages were found to have independent authority over the acquired properties they own. While 9 respondents had joint control over the properties with their spouse, demonstrating instances of personal financial autonomy and capability leading to legal ownership and control over property. Their involvement primarily revolved around selling, purchasing, and mortgaging property they acquired. While these actions are somewhat limited, they illustrate the specific circumstances in which women assert decision-making authority, which is frequently restricted by patriarchal structures that favour male dominance in property management. The remaining 185 (92.5%) lacked decision-making authority over landed property because they did not own any property.

From the perspective of decision-making in households due to land ownership, 52 respondents, 28 from developed and 24 from underdeveloped villages, felt that owning land would give women a greater say in household decision-making, as said by Giovarelli (2006) and Basnet (2012). These women associate land ownership with status, greater autonomy and respect within the family, and thereby enable them to actively engage in household governance. But a considerable proportion of 80 respondents (40%) does not associate land ownership with authority in household decision-making, highlighting that merely possessing land is not enough to alter the traditional family structures, particularly in a patriarchal society.

When it came to the capability of handling property like men, the majority of 139 respondents (69.5%) felt that women can manage property just as effectively as men. This comprised 89 respondents from developed villages and 50 from underdeveloped villages, who emphasised that management skills

can be learnt over time and are not inherently linked to gender, and if given the opportunity, women would handle responsibilities as effectively as men. However, despite the strong consensus on women's capability, a small minority of 19 respondents (9.5%), four from developed and 15 from underdeveloped villages, expressed doubts and believed that women are incapable of managing property in the same way as men. This indicates the internalised gender biases and acceptance of marginalisation in property ownership, its rights and management.

On the significance of land ownership, 74 respondents stressed that it would enhance the welfare and wellbeing of their family, while 18 respondents opined that they would be less likely to experience economic vulnerability (Kola, 2018). 15 respondents believed that it would lead to more decision-making and political clout (Shrestha, 2009), and five respondents agreed that it would give them more bargaining power and ability (Mookerjee, 2015; Gupta, 2022). At the same time, 54 respondents argued that it would lead to more decision-making power, which would result in increased economic well-being and family welfare (Mishra and Sam, 2016). The remaining 34 respondents believed that land ownership would lead to all the benefits previously mentioned.

The study also explored whether owning land would act as a domestic violence deterrent and observed that the majority of 152 respondents (76%) believe that land ownership offers some level of protection from domestic violence, as seen in Bhatla, Chakraborty and Duvvury (2006). This indicated that women with property ownership are less vulnerable to abuse, as ownership provides financial autonomy, exit options in abusive relationships, and bargaining power in household dynamics, supporting the work of Kola (2018). In addition to deterring domestic violence, the respondents of the study also believed that property ownership would empower women more broadly by providing economic self-sufficiency, upward mobility, and heightened self-esteem. 165 respondents (82.5%), 81 from developed and 84 from underdeveloped villages, expressed that owning property would ensure financial stability and provide

generational security in the long run, as shown by Duflo (2003), Nagarajan et al. (2010), and Kumar and Quisumbing (2013).

On the transformative impacts of property ownership on women's lives, the 21 respondents who owned property acknowledged that it contributed to their empowerment. This indicates that only a small minority of Ao Naga women from the study experienced empowerment as a result of owning property. The empowerment that came as a result of them owning property included improved living standards in family and society, a greater decision-making role and economic development.

The present study therefore stresses the transformative potential of property ownership, coupled with its impact on women's empowerment. For Ao Naga women, owning property is just more than a financial asset; it serves as key factor in their empowerment, respect and a stronger voice. While societal norms often limit women's right to inherit and own property, those who do own land perceive themselves feeling secure, stable, and self-sufficient, emphasising the importance of property ownership in improving the lives of women in Ao society.

7.4 Barriers to Women's Access to Property

Chapter VI presents the barriers that prevent Ao Naga women from accessing and inheriting property. The limited access of women in Ao society to inheritance and property rights reflects the culmination of traditional practices, customary laws, political structures, land use systems, clan structures, kinship practices, and identities related to land. Despite some women owning property acquired through purchase or via parents' will, they remain excluded from the ancestral clan properties, creating disparities in property ownership with only men having the rights to own and inherit it. As such, this chapter identified the factors that act as barriers and impede women's access to property ownership and inheritance in Ao society and, at the same time, evaluated the societal efforts towards women's standing on property inheritance under five thematic headings: 1. Experiences of discrimination; 2. Gender bias in property rights;

3. Accessibility issues; 4. Reforming traditions; 5. Role of government and civil society and 6. Case studies.

When it came to the experiences of discrimination, the study found out that only one respondent from a developed village was deprived of her right to property. A closer look at this case (Respondent 6) revealed that the discrimination was about her claim to her parents' acquired property, not ancestral property. This distinction revealed an important feature in the inheritance system of the Ao Nagas: where the traditional practice excludes women from inheriting ancestral properties, they give equal rights to the parents' acquired properties. Consequently, the study highlighted that discrimination occurred solely in the context of acquired property. In contrast, women perceive the exclusion from ancestral properties as just, non-discriminatory and inclusionary.

In terms of the instances of respondents' acquaintances suffering such deprivation, it was seen that 11 respondents were aware of their acquaintances who were denied the rights to acquired property, with respondents from developed villages (7) more vocal than their underdeveloped counterparts (4). Thus, in this study, although only one respondent from a developed village faced the issue of being denied the right to property, the respondents Many individuals have female acquaintances who were deprived of their acquired property rights; although this issue is not widespread, it remains a significant reality in Ao society.

The study also focused on examining gender bias (Grown et al., 2005) in property rights and explored whether the respondents were barred from land rights because they were women. It found that a significant 146 respondents (73%) felt that they were denied the rights to property simply because they are women. While the remaining respondents argued that the rights in the inheritance practice of the Ao society do not depend on their gender alone. Although it certainly plays a role, there are other factors that contribute to women's lack of access to property and inheritance rights. As such, the effects

of gender on property ownership were also examined, and 146 respondents stated that women do not enjoy equality in land and property rights, and 12 respondents opined that women own less than men solely or jointly. 17 respondents further stated that women have fewer rights than men, and 25 respondents stated that even when women do own land, the plots are smaller as compared to men. Thus, along with the intricate cultural beliefs and traditional practices, gender does play a significant role in the inheritance practice of Ao society, with a biased preference for men.

The accessibility issues faced by women in Ao society ranged in terms of sociocultural, legal and psychological barriers. Socio-cultural practices dictate that women are not entitled to own property because of the symbolic identity attached to land, the patrilocal residence system and the political system as well. The prevalence of these socio-cultural traditions becomes a persistent barrier to Ao women's land ownership, restricting their ability to inherit, own, or control property despite legal provisions for gender equality, as said by Rao (2011). Moreover, while socio-cultural norms dictate exclusionary practices and expectations, patriarchy sustains it by legitimising and reinforcing it (Rawal and Agrawal, 2016). The different roles, rights and privileges for both men and women are set by patriarchy, shaping the family dynamics and the power structure in Ao society. Plus, over the course of time, this arrangement has become normalised and has stayed unchallenged.

The legal structure and governance system of Ao society further exacerbate the situation. The respondents of the study acknowledged that customary law (Nongbri, 1998; Fernandes & Bharali, 2009) is another primary barrier to women's property rights in Ao society, with 133 respondents terming it as men-centric. It functions as a cultural and legal authority, upholding the patriarchal structure and determining the rights and privileges of men and women in Ao society, which further sustains its dominance. Furthermore, despite the prevalence of formal legal frameworks guaranteed through the Indian Constitution, customary laws have stayed unchallenged, and this dual legal system creates a conflict between the two instead.

The structural exclusion of women is further reflected in the governance system of the Ao Nagas. The study observed that there are limited power and involvement and the opinions of the women are not considered or are disregarded as well. Furthermore, the society exclusively reserves governance and leadership roles for men. As such, in Ao society the important leadership positions are taken by men or reserved for men, and this reinforces the secondary position of women in the society. Their roles are delegated to household affairs, and the governance and decision-making aspects stay with the men.

Ao women's exclusion in inheritance practices is further compounded by legal and knowledge barriers. Awareness of legal rights plays a vital role, but only 66 respondents were aware of their legal rights. In contrast, the remaining respondents lacked knowledge of legal rights and were unsure if other legal aspects applied to women. It was also seen that not many have given any thoughts on it at all, as such legal rights and practices are not a part of everyday conversation in their lives. This general lack of legal knowledge also shown by Verma and Narwal (2024) among the respondents highlights a critical gap between legal provisions and social reality, further compounding and affecting the awareness of writing wills. Only 26 respondents were aware of or understood the concept of writing a will, which would give their daughters or anyone in their will the right to inherit their acquired properties. Moreover, the majority of the respondents were not aware of any campaigns or awareness programmes on legal rights that were organised by women's organisations.

In addition to the socio-cultural and legal barriers that are often visibly recognised as obstacles to women's rights to property, psychological barriers also represent a subtle yet significant challenge. The most common psychological barrier was fear, as seen in Rekha & Yaseen (2012). Ao women do not claim and assert their share of property because of the fear of social consequences, family conflicts, or the risk of cultural condemnation and exclusion. Patriarchy again further exacerbated this situation, keeping women

from questioning and challenging the traditional inheritance practices. However, fear and normalisation of the traditional inheritance practice have become indistinguishable, since Ao women do not see the denial of property as a violation but rather as something that is culturally appropriate. Because of this, changes in law or constitutional guarantee alone cannot change the inheritance practice that is internalised so deeply, without also addressing the social, psychological, and cultural mechanisms that uphold and perpetuate the discriminatory norms.

Women also face more challenges in exercising their rights, and there is also increased vulnerability due to lack of property. But property ownership does not guarantee full security, even though it empowers women and improves their status. Rather, the emphasis was laid on education, employment and self-sufficiency as a subsequent result of it supporting the work of (Toktas & O'Neil, 2013). Additionally, the majority of respondents in the study (124 individuals) and Ao women in general did not consider women's demands for a share of ancestral property to be legitimate. The opposition stems from the fact that women themselves view the inheritance of properties as naturally a male domain, and property ownership might empower women in different ways, but the internalisation of the cultural practice creates a perception that going against the accepted practice would make one seem rebellious or even selfish. As such, Ao women themselves are protective of the cultural practice and do not recognise the legitimacy of women asking for a share in ancestral property.

When it comes to the inheritance reform, the respondent's perception of whether property inheritance rights are necessary for women was examined and explored. Only 86 respondents believed that property inheritance rights are necessary for women, stating that property can provide sustenance and status, bargaining abilities, determine economic independence and become essential when one is unemployed or when there are fewer opportunities. Meanwhile, 92 respondents rejected the notion that property inheritance rights are necessary women, highlighting that making any shift towards equitable inheritance rights

is seen as unnecessary and disruptive to the cultural practice. Any move towards challenging or standing against the norm is considered a threat to the cultural identity where gendered exclusion is not perceived as injustice but rather as a traditional practice.

The study further explored whether respondents believed that there is a need to bring changes in the property inheritance system or not and found out that the majority, 155 respondents, expressed opposition to inheritance reform, reflecting a strong commitment to traditional norms. It is indicative of the fact that Ao women have internalised the patriarchal values and are apprehensive about the potential social or familial backlash if they attempt to challenge or go against the inheritance system. Only 17 respondents were seen to express support for reforming the inheritance practices, pointing out that Ao women do not really stress the need for reform and enhanced equality for women.

Women in Ao society thus face numerous barriers starting from socio-cultural practices to legal and local governance structures as well as psychological barriers. Women's gender also plays a significant role, with the symbolic identity attached to land, coupled with patrilineal practices and political systems that maintain and create an exclusionary inheritance system. Moreover, even though the inheritance practice is discriminatory in nature, Ao women themselves uphold and perpetuate the system, as they have been socialised and internalised to believe and accept the inheritance practices as the norm. Thus, Ao women themselves believe that property inheritance rights are not necessary for women, nor do they believe that there is a need for change or reform in the inheritance practice of Ao society.

In terms of the role of government and civil society organisations, the study found that there is a need to translate laws into the local language to enhance the awareness of both women and men in general in Ao society to keep one aware of their rights and make more informed decisions in matters that would benefit them. It was also seen that there is a collective desire of Ao women to understand the legal laws and effectively navigate their applicable rights. All

of these outcomes would be possible through the initiatives by the government and civil societies to bridge the gap between formal and customary laws.

It was also evident that even though awareness initiatives are vital, government and civil society organisations must also confront the deeply rooted societal and cultural practices, and the study found that a significant 77 respondents believed that there is reluctance among different organisations and parties to engage with the issues of women's property rights. Although some believe that there is no reluctance as such especially on acquired properties, the reluctance to engage with ancestral properties reflects the broader hesitation of the parties involved to challenge the customary practices that have been handed down, accepted and followed as the norm.

In terms of the initiatives taken, the church, the Watsu Mungdang and different civil societies using different mediums and strategies have been actively involved in raising awareness through different means and advocating for women's property rights. However, despite all the initiatives and awareness efforts, a common sentiment seen among the respondents of the study was that, customary and cultural practices deter the impact of such initiatives on ancestral properties and even at times with acquired properties, thereby remaining as a persistent barrier for women's right to inherit property in Ao society.

Nonetheless, the study concludes that the exclusion of women from property rights in Ao society will continue to exist as an unquestionable norm rather than being contested, and deviation from the accepted norm would encounter stigmatisation and even ostracisation. The only possible outcome and realistic progress lie in securing and guaranteeing equal rights for women in acquired properties through proper legal laws and awareness, which can be done through the intervention of government and civil society organisations as well as the stakeholders involved in general.

7.5 Developed and Underdeveloped Villages in Context

This study employed a comparative research design, and as such, one of the objectives was to do a comparative analysis of the developed and underdeveloped villages. The differences in perspectives and lived experiences among Ao women were presented largely qualitatively while analysing the findings. The following table summarises the differences between the developed and underdeveloped villages in terms of some selected quality parameters.

Table 7.1. Comparing Developed and Underdeveloped Villages

Sl. No	Parameters	Developed Village	Underdeveloped Village	Key Insights
1.	Property Ownership Status	17 respondents own acquired property; None holds ancestral land. Separate space for self-acquired against inheritance.	4 respondents own acquired property; None hold ancestral land. Separate space for self-acquired against inheritance.	Ownership higher in developed villages due to access to resources; Extended 'security and independence'.
2.	Source of Self-acquired Property	Purchase (13) Wills (3) Permitted (1)	Purchase (2) Permitted (2)	Economic agency is higher in developed villages; underdeveloped villages rely on kin, spouse or permission.

3.	Control of Acquired Property	Joint ownership (13), Self-ownership (3) Permission-based (1)	Joint ownership (2) Permission-based (2)	Empowerment is insignificant; Joint control and patriarchal decision-making looms large.
4.	Basis of lack of entitlement to Ancestral property	Clan and Lineage (82) Gender (18)	Clan and Lineage (76) Gender (24)	Collective ownership of clan land; Do not bother about entitlement nor related claims.
5.	Conflict over Property Rights	Land dispute involvement (1); Fear of violence and family division; Some women challenge norms.	Land dispute involvement (0); Family problems due to lack of property; Few challenge norms.	Barest minimum dispute over acquired properties; Conflict over rights to ancestral Property was none.
6.	Experiences of Discrimination	Only 1 woman reported direct discrimination (acquired property, not ancestral); More aware of acquaintances facing issues (7)	None personally experienced deprivation; Less aware of acquaintance with issues (4)	Discrimination is rarest of the rare and an unclaimed fact and a non-issue.

7.	Gender bias in property rights and Psychological Barriers	Barred from rights because of Gender (70); Awareness linked to patriarchy, education and comparison with wider world; Fear of going against norms (71); Fear of sanctions, guilt, stigma, clan backlash and relational issues.	Barred from rights because of Gender (76); Stressed on different privileges and internalisation of norms; Fear of going against norms (62), rooted in internalised norms; However, more indecisive on the issue.	High recognition across both groups that gender bars women from land rights; Minority believe gender alone isn't the sole reason; Fear of tradition is universal both in developed and underdeveloped villages due to Internalization and Socialization.
8.	Socio-Cultural & Legal Barriers	Higher emphasis on the interplay of all socio-cultural barriers like patriarchy, clan dynamics, gender and spatial structure; Greater exposure to legal concepts like wills and	Stronger acceptance of gender norms as cultural fact; Unquestionable acceptance of customary law as natural; Overwhelmingly unaware of legal rights, wills, and	Developed villages show deeper cultural understanding and awareness; But in practice there was minimal difference between them in unequivocal

		awareness campaigns; But of no use due to predominance of patriarchal customary law	awareness campaigns.	acceptance of patriarchy. Significant legal awareness gap; Unquestionable acceptance of customary law in both.
9.	Challenges & Vulnerability	Accept inevitability of challenges faced; Vulnerability linked not to property but to education and employment	Similar strong agreement on such vulnerabilities; Majority rather linked vulnerability to lack of opportunities.	The link between property ownership and security is widely recognised; Education, employment and access to resources are seen as better empowerment routes.
10.	Role of Civil Society	More exposure to awareness; But were reluctant to address women's property issues.	Less exposure to awareness campaigns; Resilience and property issues were non-issue	Awareness and exposure better in developed villages; CS intervention is just cosmetic in both; Unbothered about culturally

				sensitive reform and more awareness.

The comparative analysis of the developed and underdeveloped villages indicates that Ao women, irrespective of the socio-economic status or habitat, do not have the right to inherit or own ancestral property. However, access to and experiences with empowerment, decision-making, control, and awareness of rights among Ao women differ when it comes to self-acquired properties. Such cases are rare.

It was notable that women in developed villages had a higher level of property ownership through purchase. But women in underdeveloped villages have fewer acquired properties and depend more on permission or usufructuary rights to land granted by relatives or spouses. This study shows how economic capacity directly influences the possibility of women's ownership and autonomy over acquired properties. Moreover, in developed villages the acquired properties were also jointly owned, and decision-making was shared between the spouses. In contrast, women in underdeveloped villages exhibited less independent decision-making and more dependence on male members. However, despite the prevalence of joint ownership, decision-making was largely patriarchal.

Clan, lineage, political structure, clan dynamics, and gender all contribute to the absence of ancestral property ownership or rights in Ao society. Women in developed villages were more aware of how those social norms were influenced by patriarchy and the societal structure of Ao society, while women in underdeveloped villages regarded it as inherent to their gender. Conflict over property rights also differed between developed and underdeveloped villages. Women in developed villages reported occasional disputes over acquired properties. However, there were no such reports of conflicts with ancestral properties. This absence, however, came with greater economic vulnerability.

In terms of legal awareness, there were also significant disparities. Women in developed villages, owing to increased exposure to awareness programmes, possessed enhanced knowledge and understanding of customary law, wills, and legal rights, while women in underdeveloped villages showed limited legal awareness and greater acceptance of customary law as a natural and accepted norm. Psychological barriers, including fear of sanctions, guilt, backlash, or social exclusion, are prominent among women in Ao society. Women in developed villages often perceive these fears as socially constructed, while women in underdeveloped villages exhibit internalised acceptance, resulting in silence, indecisiveness, and a reluctance to challenge societal norms.

Women in both developed and underdeveloped villages acknowledge that they encounter greater challenges as compared to men in terms of ownership and property rights. Women in developed villages prioritise education and employment as better means of empowerment, while women in underdeveloped villages consider property ownership fundamental to alleviating their vulnerability. Perspectives on the roles of civil society and organisations also differed significantly, with women in developed villages indicating a reluctance to confront women's property rights directly by such organisations, whereas women in underdeveloped villages remain largely unaware and indecisive.

Overall, although customary norms and practices are uniform throughout Ao Naga society, various factors such as economic mobility, education, and awareness have empowered women in developed villages to critically examine the traditional norms and assert their limited rights while still adhering to them, and women in underdeveloped villages showed deeper internalisation of the restrictive norms without critically examining why and accepted them as the norm.

7.6 Sociological Implications of the Study

The overall picture of the study highlights that there is a complex interplay of socio-cultural traditions, patriarchal norms, customary laws, kinship and

marriage structures, clan dynamics and identity, political systems and gender norms, all of which interact and come together to form the inheritance system of Ao society, where women are denied the right to own or inherit ancestral property. Besides the findings of the study, it is essential to examine and theoretically contextualise why the practice is the way it is and understand its sociological context. To do that, 6 theories have been employed: the gender theory of inheritance, kinship theories of descent and alliance, symbolic interactionism, social exchange theory, conflict perspective, and the human rights approach. By using these theories, the study tries to get an understanding of the inheritance practice of Ao Naga society.

Table 7.2 Integrated Theoretical Perspectives and its context for the study

Theory	Theorist	Postulates	Study Context
Gender Theory	Agarwal (1994), Hacker (2010), Rao (2011), Zhllima et al., (2021)	1. Women's gender affects her rights. 2. Patriarchal tradition limits women's inheritance rights. 3. Socio-cultural norms and perceptions reinforce gender biases. 4. Traditional informal norms classify women as second-class citizens.	Among the Aos, this scenario is visible in the cultural imperative that men are landowners while women are excluded from ownership rights or inheritance.
Kinship theory: Descent and Alliance	Evans-Pritchard, (1940), Fortes (1953), Maine (1861), Morgan (1877), Brown & Sowayan (1977).	1. Principal lines of descent are patrilineal. 2. Patriarchy as earliest form of Kinship. 3. Settled agriculture resulted in control over women and monogamy	Property remains within the male line because of patriarchy, institutionalisation of gender roles and symbolic clan-

	Levis Strauss (1949)	so that properties could pass on to his children. 4. Clan based ownership of property are symbolic. 5. Significance of property as a symbol of the family. 6. Interactions and connections built through marriage and the exchange of women between groups.	based ownership. Marriage alliances also reinforce women's exclusion by transferring them to other clans, limiting their claims to ancestral property.
Symbolic Interactionism	Mead (1934), Kuhn (1964), Blumer (1969),	1. Social construction of meanings. 2. Internalisation of societal roles and expectations. 3. Meanings and social interaction	Symbolic meanings attached to land as communal identity and clan ownership make women's exclusion appear to be natural or even necessary, and Ao women have internalised the norm.
Social Exchange	Chavanness (1901), Kelley (1959) Scanzoni (1970), Homans (1961), Blau (1964), Edward (1969) Osmond and Thorne (1993)	1. Exchange as the foundation of all human relationships. 2. Human relationships based on benefits and cost associated exchange. 3. Interaction in terms of exchange. 4. Solidarity developed	Marriage practices are justified in terms of exchange or marriage within different clans. The exchange/marriage between different clans normalise the unfair denial of

		when marital exchanges are fair. 5. Interaction among humans within a social structure is goal oriented rather than random.	rights to women to protect it.
Conflict Perspective	Engels (1884), Simmel (1956) Coser (1956), Dahrendorf (1959), Homans (1961), Lenski (1966), Engles (1970).	1. Social groups deprived of material resources fighting to remedying the injustice. 2. Property is considered as a scarce resource by men and women fighting for equal inheritance results in conflict. 3. Significant power differentiation of men and women. 4. Superimposition. 5. Distributive Justice. 6. As long as scarcity exists conflict arises over the distribution of resources. 7. Men instituted monogamy to ensure that they could pass on his property to male child.	Disputes arise when women fight for equal inheritance. Going against the practice is also seen as a challenge to patriarchy and is resisted because it is perceived as disrupting the social order, threat to male privilege and clan autonomy and identity.
Human Rights Based Approach	UN General Assembly (1948) Hellebrunn (2001)	1. Principle of non-discrimination based on sex. 2. Non-discriminatory right	Provides interventive framework and ethical grounding

	Koskinen (2005). Ikdahl et al. (2005) Nowak (2005	to livelihood. 3. Assist women in identification of rights and foster their right to assert claims on property. 4. Human agencies, capabilities and entitlement as key factors in equality and development. 5. Entitlements to rights with legal obligations to respect, protect, and fulfil rights.	for the study and asserts what ought to be. It also suggests the policy recommendations for justice and equality. Yet despite the legal provisions, Customary law becomes a hindrance and Ao women also deem the inheritance rights as non- necessary.

The different theoretical perspectives integrated offer a comprehensive understanding of the intricacies related to Ao women's property inheritance rights. It draws attention to the enduring impact of the patriarchal customs, the gendered norms, the significance of kinship, marriage alliance and descent in the transfer of property, the meaning attached to property, the inevitability of conflict over scarce resources and unfair distribution and the critical need for a human rights-based strategy to guarantee gender equality in terms of inheritance practices. These theoretical perspectives highlight the fact that the inheritance practice of Ao society is deeply embedded and rooted in the cultural practice and traditions of the society, whereby it is socially constructed with significant implications to cultural identity. Tradition maintains its stronghold and individuals have been socialised in the practice that even the women themselves knowingly and consciously adhere to the inheritance norm and collectively choose to uphold the prevailing practice due to their socialisation and continue to appreciate the resilience instead of change.

Moreover, while the different theoretical perspectives offer valuable insights, none alone can adequately explain the complexity of women's property inheritance in Ao Naga society. Each theory sheds light on one dimension of the issue, but when connected in sequence, they reveal a cyclical process that explains both the prevalence and the persistence of gender inequality in the property inheritance rights. As such a 4-layer cyclical model have been developed integrating all the theories to explain the cycle of discrimination in the inheritance practice which is presented in the following page.

This model comprises of four interconnected layers:

Layer 1 - Gendered property inheritance of Ao Naga Women

Layer 2 - Triggering factors of gendered property inheritance

Layer 3 - Implications of the gendered property inheritance

Layer 4 - Theoretical contextualisation of the implications.

The first layer (gendered property inheritance) highlights the gendered nature of property inheritance among Ao Naga women, who are traditionally restricted from inheriting ancestral property. The second layer (triggering factors) explicates the very factors which together tend to trigger such gendered discrimination. These factors included: a). customary law b). clan norms c). ancestral property and d). acquired property. The third layer (implications or consequences) explores the implications of this gendered inheritance system, examining the underlying causes and consequences of women's exclusion from property rights through six components. Finally, the fourth layer (contextualisation of theories) offers a theoretical contextualisation of these six implications in an integrated framework, that leads to the gendered property inheritance of Ao Naga women.

Thus, by implication 2nd layer provides the causal dimension of Layer 1. Layer 3 indicates the very consequential implications of Layer 1 and 2. Layer 4 puts the relevant theories to context relating to Layer 3, 2 and 1 in an integrated pluralistic theoretical framework.

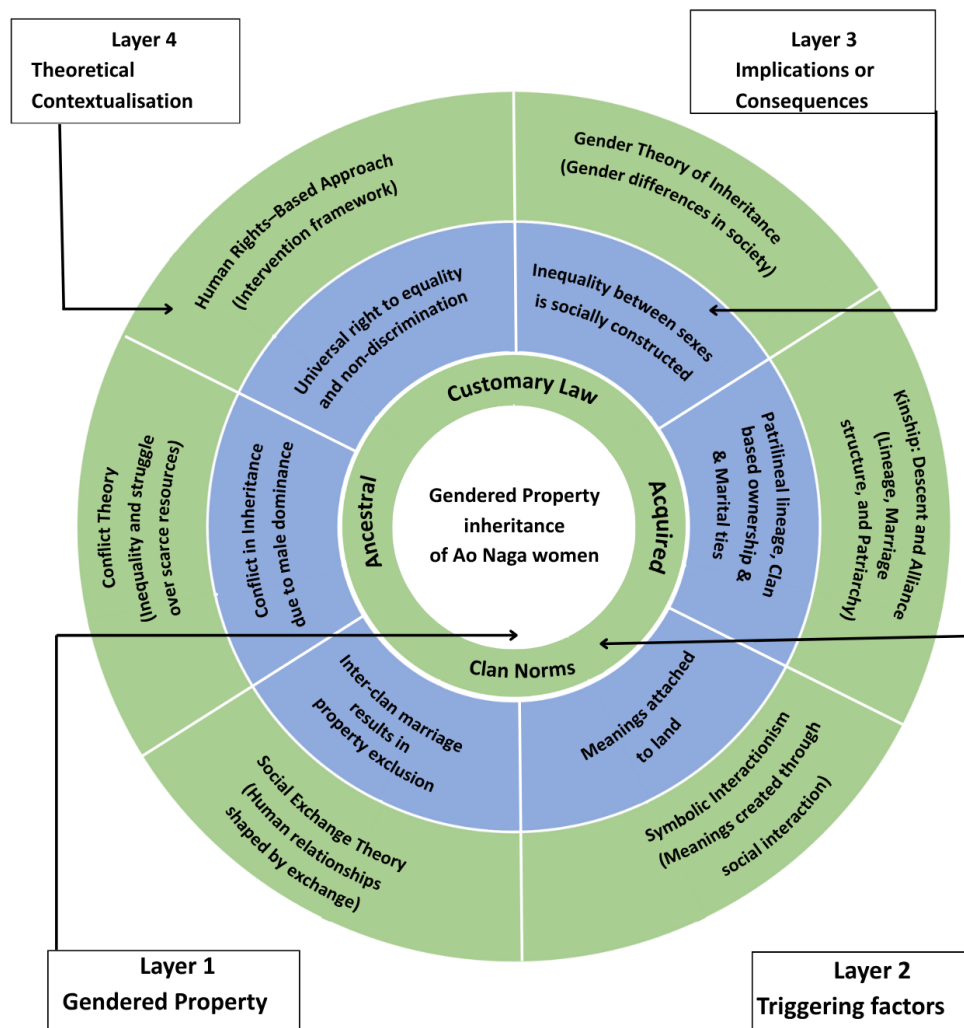


Fig 7.1. Ao Women's Integrated Inheritance Cycle Model (AWIICM)

To understand this cyclical nature, the Gender theory of inheritance establishes that every society is characterised by gender differences in accessing the rights, resources, and opportunities. Patriarchal traditions, socio-cultural norms and perceptions reinforce the gender bias and classify women as second-class citizens. In the context of the Aos, this bias is evident in cultural expectations that men are landowners while women are excluded from owning or inheriting land. The kinship theories of descent and alliance elaborate that the gendered roles are institutionalised through the principal line of descent, which is patrilineal in tribal societies. These patrilineal kinship structures dictate that

property should remain within the male line because the clan-based ownership of property is symbolic, and marriage alliances reinforce women's exclusion by transferring them to other clans and limiting their claims to ancestral property.

The gender disparities and practices gain legitimacy through the lens of symbolic interactionism and social exchange theory. On the one hand, marriage practices are justified in terms of exchange or marriage within different clans. On the other hand, symbolic meanings attached to land as ancestral identity and clan ownership make women's exclusion appear to be natural or even necessary. These symbolic and exchange-based meanings are the unfair denial of property rights to women in Ao society, and this structural arrangement leads to conflict, which the conflict perspective helps to explain. Since land is considered a scarce resource that belongs to men and clans, disputes naturally arise when women go against that practice and fight for equal ownership and inheritance. This is seen as a challenge to patriarchy, and women's claim to property is resisted because granting them the rights is perceived as disrupting the social order and threatening the male privilege and clan autonomy. The result of this cyclical process is the outcome: the systematic denial of property ownership by women and its inheritance in Ao society.

This gender disparity and discriminatory practice can be theoretically addressed through the human rights-based approach. Different international frameworks, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), CEDAW - the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979), the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995), the Sustainable Development Goals (2015), the principle of non-discrimination and the right to equality under the Indian Constitution, and all various policies and reforms for a corrective intervention to equality. Such frameworks advocate for the recognition of women's right to property as a fundamental entitlement. Nevertheless, in practice, these policies and reforms

remain largely ineffective in the case of the Ao Nagas, where there is a prevalence of customary laws over formal laws.

Moreover, despite the discriminatory nature of the inheritance practice and various platforms for reform, the findings of the study highlight that Ao women in general, including the educated, employed, and well-to-do self-reliant women elites, were opposed to change and did not stand for inheritance rights or a share of ancestral property. The internalisation of cultural practices and collective consciousness of traditional norms results in women's reluctance to claim inheritance rights; they argue instead that property should remain with men alone. Thus, the cycle continues where women in Ao society themselves continue and perpetuate the discriminatory practice despite the availability and efforts of legal reforms.

7.6 Future areas for research

Future researchers can consider and explore the following points regarding property inheritance rights of Ao and Naga women in their research endeavours:

1. The current study included only two sub-divisions, four administrative circles and four Ao villages, as well as a total of only 200 respondents in the study. Future studies should consider including all the four sub-divisions, nine administrative circles and the different villages under them to make the study more inclusive and derive a stronger conclusion and findings.
2. The universe of the study has been classified through the four Sub-divisions. However, future researchers can also classify it according to the six ranges of Mokokchung District and identify the villages for the study to select the respondents.
3. In future studies, focus should also be laid on examining the perspectives of both men and women on an equal footing and comparing their perspectives on the inheritance issue.

4. A longitudinal and comparative study can further examine whether attitudes towards inheritance norms are shifting among the younger generations of Ao Naga men and women.
5. The current study highlights that discrimination occurs within the 'acquired property' of parents as well. Future research can also focus on an in-depth study on acquired properties and the dynamics involved with them to have a deeper understanding.
6. The study is also limited to the Ao tribe in general. Researchers can also explore the broader issue of Naga women's inheritance rights by conducting a study that includes various Naga tribes, allowing for a comparison of similarities, differences, and key issues related to these inheritance rights.
7. Further studies and research can also examine specific cases of conflict that arise when formal legal laws and customary laws interact or are in conflict with each other with regard to inheritance rights and the laws governing them.

In conclusion, this study shows that the exclusion of Ao Naga women from ancestral property inheritance is sustained through a complex interplay of patriarchy, customary law, and the internalisation of cultural norms and practices. Inheritance practices and beliefs are transmitted across generations as part of socialisation, reproducing values attached to land, lineage, and gender roles until they become accepted as natural and unquestioned.

Land in Ao society is regarded as a communal property and holds cultural significance. It is not merely an economic resource but a symbolic marker of clan identity, descent, and cultural continuity. Land is therefore not considered a property in general since it is communally owned. However, only land that can be bought and sold is recognised as property (acquired), and women are granted the right to own such land or inherit it. Applied to Ao society, this means that anyone who can purchase private land independently has the right to do so, and that land becomes their acquired property.

On a bigger picture, the Ao Naga inheritance system and practice is such that it safeguards the culture and identity of the people, with property transmission structured along male lineage. Yet, this system is increasingly recognised within contemporary discourses as discriminatory. A key sociological insight of this study is that Ao women themselves often internalise and uphold these practices, viewing them as integral to cultural identity rather than as a site of contestation. The findings thus highlight the challenges of balancing tradition in line with the contemporary ideals of gender equality and rights. Further studies should therefore continue to explore and understand the interwoven threads of tradition, gender and power in Naga and Ao society, while respecting and understanding the cultural identity.

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APPENDIX -I

Research Diary

23.08. 2021 -Ph.D. Interview

25.08.2021 -Selection results for Ph.D.

30.08.2021 -Admission for Ph.D.

3.09.21 -ICT orientation for new Ph.D. Scholars

1.10.2021 - 7.10.2021 -Short Term Course (Online) on Research and Publication Ethics, organised by HRDC Mizoram University.

1.11.2021 - Start of coursework and first Ph.D. class. (Theoretical Dimensions of Research Methodology - Philosophy of Social Sciences) by Prof. R.K. Mohanty (RKM)

2.11.2021 - Functionalism of Karl Mannheim & Sorokin and How society is managed, maintained and transformed. Dr. N. William Singh. (NWS)

3.11.2021 - Social Reality from Marxist Perspective, Anthony Gramsci and Karl Marx. Dr B. Lalzarliana (BLZ). Supervisors' allotment List -Prof. R.K. Mohanty was allotted as my supervisor.

4.11.2021 - Methodology of Social Sciences: Ontology, Epistemology and Axiology. (RKM)

5.11.2021 - Frankfurt School and Critical Theory, Dialectics of Enlightenment, Mass Culture (BLZ).

6.11.2021 - Post Colonial Arguments -Dominating Culture/Material Culture (NWS). Popular culture is nothing else but dubious and live in too much emphasis on material culture.

9.11.2021 - Ontology- What can be derived from the real world. Realism and Relativism as 2 Parts. Epistemology - Validity, scope and Methods of

acquiring knowledge. Objectivism, Subjectivism and Constructivism -3 Branches of Epistemology (RKM). Neo-Functionalism and Reflexive Sociology (NWS).

10.11.2021 - Frankfurt School: Walter Benjamin- How we look at cities, commodification and Urban aspects; Eric From -Anatomy of Human Destructiveness; Adorno -Thesis of the end of individual (BLZ).

11.11.2021 - Maz Weber- Are we doing science, as a profession or one's choice or because of certain interest or because of an agenda of the state? Clifford Geertz- Thick Description. (NWS).

16.11.2021 - How to write a proper research Proposal (under 13 Heading) - RKM. From this, I realised the need to work more on my Research Proposal. To include operationalisation of Concepts, Research ethics and limitations of the study.

17.11.2021 - The debate about Subjectivity, Objectivity and Intersubjectivity (RKM). Theory of Structuration (BLZ).

18.11.2021 - Dramaturgy and Symbolic Interactionism (NWS).

20.11.2021 -Scholarly debate and views on Weber, Pareto, Sorokin, Caplin, Richard S. Rudyner (RKM).

22.11.2021 - Habermas- Types of Action (BLZ).

23.11.2021 - 1). Ethnomethodology and Phenomenology (RKM) 2). Husserl's Phenomenology and Garfinkel's Ethnomethodology (NWS)

29.11.2021 - How to do proper literature review. Interpretation and Synthesis of earlier works. (RKM). Modernity -Giddens, Ulrich Beck -Risk Society and assignment to relate any theory from the classes so far to social reality (BLZ).

1.12.2021 - Manuel Castel -Theory of Hyper Reality (BLZ).

2.12.2021 - Research and Publication Ethics (RKM).

4.12.2021 - Thesis Writing, SPES -Situation, Problem study, Evaluation and Solution. SMART- Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Writing. Plagrism (RKM).

5.12.2021 - Submission of research proposal draft to Supervisor and Difficulty encountered in the Sampling process for Research Proposal.

7.12.2021 - Proposal Feedback: 1). Literature review not satisfactory, needed more reviews and classifications according to theme. 2). Advised on sampling process. To read more and see what other studies have done before.

8.12.2021 - Sampling Design Class by Dr. Laldinpuii Ralte (Clearly defined sample and representative)

10.12.2021 - SPSS Lecture -Prof. Zokaitluangi.

15.12.21 - Progress satisfactory for Research Proposal literature review.

10.02.2022 - Asked Supervisor for help with Sampling. Besides that, mostly finished with the things needed for the research proposal.

2.03.2022 - To decide sampling through Multi-stage Sampling process. 2 sub-divisions, administrative circles, and to the villages.

11.03.2022 - Notice for DRC (Department Research Committee) and presentation of Research proposal on 25.03.2022.

14.03.2023 - Meet Prof. Toshimenla Jamir, Sir Temjensosang and faculties in Nagaland University.

23.03.2022 - Reached University and First day at the department. Discussed the Theories, Literature reviewed and the Sample for the study.

24.03.2022 - Changes and modifications made at the PPT for the presentation.

25.03.2022 - Was advised to add the Principle of Inclusion and Exclusion. Besides that, everything went well.

28.03.2022 - Meet with Supervisor, Discussed about the principle of Inclusion and Exclusion. And was advised to add Alliance theory and Methodological Review.

30.03.2022 - Added 4 methodological reviews for the BOS as well as Alliance theory in the research proposal.

5.04.2022 - Day of BOS. Proposal was accepted but they changed the topic to the current to 'Property Inheritance Rights of Ao Naga Women.

6.04.2022 - Restructured the stock of literatures downloaded into Used and Unused Literatures and classified it theme wise.

9.04.2022 - Took 4th semester class on PESA Act 1996 as a part of training.

12.04.2022 - Supervisor showed firsthand how to search and identify relevant literatures.

19.04.2022 - Updated Supervisor about progress done on literature review.

29.04.2022 - The process of identifying relevant literatures from the reference lists.

23.05.2022 - Finished the first draft of literature review as a separate chapter. 5 theories reviewed, 10 Methodological reviews and 12 thematic themes.

25.05.2022 - Day of School Board and acceptance of Research Proposal.

26.05.2022 - Supervisor advised to add a new thematic theme "Family disputes and conflict over inheritance of properties".

2.06.2022 - Supervisor advised to add Conflict Perspective, Social Exchange theory and Human Rights Based Approach for the theoretical reviews. "It is hard to start the work. But once started, it is like diving into a jungle, opening up never ending passages to different sources of literatures."

6.06.2022 - Learned to access literatures from Sci-Hub through the DOI (Digital Object Identifier).

10.06.2022 - Helped Supervisor in typing down the review for a Post Doctoral Degree. Comment was “A good beginning with a terrible ending”. Inadequate research, methodology and improper analysis. Made me realise the evaluators expectations and research should be.

13.06.2022 - Made to do list to help me with my literature review on things that were lacking: 1). Proper introduction for the theme Property Rights and Gender. 2). Barriers to Women’s property inheritance- More reviews needed. 3). Women and Property inheritance and Customary Laws - Needed proper introduction and more reviews. 4). Women’s inheritance and SDGs -Need more reviews. 5). To read A.M Shah’s Household and Family in India. 6). More reviews for Human Rights Based Approach.

20.06.2022 - Been working on the To Do List.

24.06.2022 - Updated Supervisor on the progress made and cleared doubts. Literature review to continue for relevant literatures.

27.06.2022 - Supervisor advised to make a table for theoretical review. Theory, Postulates and Proponents. Overview of literature review to be done in a separate heading at the end of the chapter on literature review.

5.07.2022 - Helped Supervisor again with the review of another Ph.D thesis. It was accepted and recommended for the award of Dr. of Philosophy. This inspired me to met the expectations of the external reviewers and finish my degree without any setbacks.

15.07.2022 - Presentation of 1st Progress Report for Ph.D. The progress done, the problems faced and the research experiences was presented to the Department Research Committee.

8.08.2022 - After Summer holidays classes resumed again.

9.08.2022 - Under the theme ‘Women and Property Inheritance in Customary Law’ the literatures revealed that women’s ability to exercise their rights to land is impacted by cultural norms and customary laws. Taking cue from this

for Objective 4 of the study, customary law as a barrier will be examined as well.

22.08.2022 - Been working on completing the literature review chapter making it rigorous as much as possible. Also, for the 1st semester class of Classical Sociological Theories I would sit in supervisors' class to audit. This would help me more with understanding of the Classical Theories as well as the opportunity to interact with the students as well, all of which is a part of training from Sir.

27.08.2022 - Chapter 2 of Literature review has been done under 3 heads.

1. Theoretical Reviews - 6 theories
2. Methodological reviews - 11 Literatures
3. Thematic reviews - 8 themes

A total of 177 literatures has been reviewed. At the same time, more relevant literatures will be added if and when it comes up.

30.08.2022 - Theoretical table made earlier helped me to understand the theories more in connection to the study. As such supervisor advised me to do the same for Methodological and Thematic reviews to incorporate it in the overview of the study. For thematic review table, was stuck on how to proceed with the table since it had 8 different themes. But after discussing it with Supervisor, the following table was created.

19.09.2022 - A lot of time was spent trying to find the authors affiliation from the methodological and thematic reviews. However, one crucial thing that came up by doing this was identifying the fact that despite the studies and literatures reviewed were about Kinship, inheritance, family and household which all falls under Sociology and Anthropology, the literatures covered and reviewed did not find much of their affiliations. Therefore, the gap and the need for Sociological study was identified.

29.09.2022 - Theoretical Review table came to 6 pages in total. Showed it to Supervisor and gave me suggestion to cut it down by reducing the space, cutting unnecessary repetitions, gaps and reformatting the lines and wordings.

3.10.2022 - Made the changes as per the suggestions of Sir to shorten the thematic review table. After the changes made it came down to 3 pages.

4.10.2022 - Satisfied with the end result of the tables made. Of course, lot of time was spent making it and redoing it. Yet the end result helped in understanding the study and contexts more.

10.10.2022 - Finished writing the overview as per Supervisor's suggestion. A total of 177 literatures has been reviewed, in which 54 literatures were before 2000, 59 literatures for 2001 -2010 and 64 literatures for the year 2010 and above.

13.10.2022 - After the progress made, supervisor gave some changes and points to add: 1). A short introduction before each table to know what kind of table is presented. 2). To identify the key concepts and parameters from the literature review and how to proceed with framing the interview schedule with the help of it.

23.10.2022 - Finished identifying the key concepts and parameters from the literatures and defined a total of 91 concepts to be used in the interview schedule and proceed with framing the interview schedule.

27.10.2022 - Meet supervisor and asked for his suggestions on the work done. Told to list open ended questions as a,b,c... and close ended questions as 1,2,3.... To make things easier while coding it and using it for SPSS.

31.10.2022 - Finished a rough draft of the Interview Schedule with 101 close ended questions and 29 open ended questions.

12.11.2022 - Supervisor reviewed my interview schedule. Found questions which were repetitive and redundant or too length and complex to understand.

17.11.2022 - Corrections were made as per the suggestions and ended with 92 close ended questions and 42 open ended questions.

6.12.22 - Supervisor suggested me to interview the female Ao students in MZU to test the interview schedule prepared.

8.12.22 - Tested the interview schedule with 2 female respondents. Changes need to be made were observed again and were rectified.

13.12.22 - 2nd Progress report was prepared and presented. Progress was satisfactory and accepted. Will be home for winter holidays and next step would be to conduct pilot study.

13.02.2023 - Started preparing for Pilot Study which will start from 15.02.2023. Going through the Interview Schedule and printed it out. Pilot study would be conducted in 2 Villages (Ungma for Developed and Khar for Underdeveloped) with 10 respondents each.

15.02.2023 - Pilot study started in Ungma Village. 4 respondents were interviewed for the pilot study. Interviews lasted for more than an hour. Ungma village being the biggest and most developed village it was good to come across a respondent who owned property. Interview with the respondent addressed changes to be made in the interview schedule which have all been recorded in the Master Copy.

18.02.2023 - 3 respondents were interviewed further from Ungma Village

23.02.2023 - 3 More respondents were interviewed with which 10 respondents were interviewed from Ungma Village. Changes were observed, identified and necessarily addressed in the interview schedule. 1). The respondents interviewed were mainly nearby the town areas and thus it might be the reason why respondents with property ownership were prevalent. 2). It would also be better to seek help from a native to go and interview the respondents. When I went alone, not many were comfortable and willing to talk for the interview and got declined. 3). It would be a good strategy to seek help from the Village

Students Union. To help me introduce to the respondents from someone familiar to them to break the ice and make things easier.

6.03.2023 - A total of 4 respondents was interviewed and learning from the previous experience, for the pilot study in Khar Village, the Students Union was approached first. Mentioned the purpose of my work and asked them to accompany me to the different households to conduct the interview. This proved to be very helpful and fruitful as no respondents turned me down, and they were more comfortable, plus the process was less formal. Moreover, Since Khar is in another sub-division and far from home living arrangements had to be made and the most noticeable thing observed was the poor road conditions to the village.

7.03.2023 - The remaining 6 respondents were interviewed. Khar being far from the town area, none of the respondents interviewed for the pilot study did not own any property. An effort would be made to find some who do own property if in case any from the village during the fieldwork. Moreover, no changed need to be made were observed in the interview schedule.

13.03.2023 - Attended Online Ph.D Viva of Ms Limasena Jamir today from Nagaland University. My supervisor was the external. The experience helped me understand the importance of Sociological Implication of the study conducted.

14.03.2023 - After the pilot study was conducted. Data collection from Ungma Village continued on. 10 respondents were interviewed for the pilot study. 40 more respondents are needed and will continue. Moreover, the Student's Union was approached and asked for their help. Miss Limalemla, the Education Secretary of the Students Union will help me identify the households, update them before hand to expect for the interview and accompanied me to do conduct the interviews. 7 respondents (Schedule 21-27) were conducted.

15.03.2023 - 8 respondents were interviewed (Schedule 28-35).

16.03.2023 - 7 respondents were interviewed (Schedule 36-42).

17.03.2023 - 8 respondents were interviewed (Schedule 43-50).

20.03.2023 - Schedule no 51-55 were interviewed.

21.03.2023 - Another 5 more respondents were interviewed (Schedule 55-60). A total of 50 respondents has thus been interviewed from Ungma Village. Schedule 1-10 and 21-60. One thing about asking the help from Students Union led to them choosing the respondents which they deem might give more responses. Subjectivity might come in when it comes to respondents' sample. Thus, it was made sure that households and respondents from every background were included and tried to make it representative.

22.03.2023 - Data collection from Ungma Village have been concluded. Interviews lasted an average of 30-60 minutes. Based on the responses it either finished sooner or took long.

23.03.2023 - Meet and talked with Dr. Imlirenla Walling. Ex President of the Ao Women's Organisation. She talked about not touching the "Hornets' nest" i.e. asking the right to ancestral/clan land. The metaphor she used described how sensitive the issue is. The Ao Women's Organisation as a body also stays clear from that.

25.03.2023 - An experience that I constantly face or encounter "Is my interview Schedule OK? Are my questions enough? Does it need more?" There is also constant doubt in my mind. Then there are also instances where I question the relevance of my Topic.

27.03.2023 - Met with Senka Walling. A prominent Ao Journalist, Editor of Daily Newspaper and an Author. Discussed with him to get more understanding about the inheritance practice of the Ao Nagas. He said: "It is not in the Sobaliba/Way of life. So not possible for women to inherit land. Land is related to village and clan identity. Inherited by men alone to protect that identity. Women are considered as "Anung Nuza/not so relevant." So, no right for women to inherit land." Today we can see the acceptance of women to Self-Acquired Properties.

30.03.2023 - Started preparing an Abstract for a National Seminar. Came up with the title “The interactions of Norms and Culture in a Globalised world: A study of AO Women’s Inheritance rights.”

5.04.2023 - Reached campus today for meeting supervisor and update the work done.

17.04.2023 - Met with Supervisor, updated the progress made and the observations and changes done after Polit Study. Also Discusses about the total number of Sample. It was decided to reduce the sample from 400 to 200 respondents. 4 villages only as compared to the proposed 8 villages and 50 respondents each.

25.04.2023 - Reached home from the campus to continue with the data collection.

26.04,2023-20.04.2023 -Wrote the full aper to be submitted for the seminar. As per supervisors’ suggestion focus was also laid on the conflict between Formal law and customary law.

1.05.2023 - Data collection will continue in Mopungchuket Village. My Father friend was contacted before had to help with the interview process as well as to stay at their place during the field work since it is far from home.

3.05.2023 - Wrote another abstract for 2-day National Seminar organised by PUC. “A comparative study of Mizo and Naga Women’s Inheritance rights.”

5.05.2023 - Reached Mopungchuket Village. Staying over at father’s friend (Oku Lima). Uncle took me to 3 houses in the evening. Schedule 61-63.

6.05.2023 - Interviewed 11 Respondents (Schedule 64-74).

7.05.2023 - 4 respondents (Schedule 75-78)

8.05.2023 - 7 respondents were interviewed. Schedule 79-85. In total 25 interviews were conducted in Mopungchuket village and returned back home.

10.05.2023-12-05.2023 - Abstract that was sent for PUC got accepted. These 3 days was mostly spent writing full paper for the seminar.

13.05.2023 - Came down to Molungkimong Village. Staying over in another acquaintance of my father (Semrenti) who would also accompany me to the interviews. Did 4 interviews. Schedule 86-89.

14.05.2023 - Schedule 90-95 were interviewed.

15.05.2023 - Interviewed 5 respondents (Schedule 95-100). So far from Molungkimong village only respondent 92 owned property.

19.05.2023 - Presented the paper for National Seminar at Pachhunga University College (PUC).

30.05.2023 - 31.05.2023 - 2 Days National Seminar Organised by Department of Sociology Mizoram University. Presented Second Paper at the seminar.

23.05.2023 - 3rd Progress Report was presented to the Department Research Committee.

9.06.2023 - A report of work done was presented at Nagaland University. The work done so far, the experiences and initial field work experiences were presented.

4.07.2023 - Continued with the fieldwork again in Molungkimong Village. Staying over in Semrenti's house again. 6 respondents (Schedule 101-106) were interviewed.

5.07.2023 - Schedule 107-111 were interviewed.

8.07.2023 - Respondents from Schedule 112 -116 were interviewed.

10.07.2023 - Respondents 117-123 were interviewed.

12.07.2023 - Schedule 124-130 were interviewed.

14.07.2023 - The last remaining respondents from Molungkimong Village were interviewed. Schedule 131-135. (schedule 86-135). The village is experiencing a slow decline in population with more and more villagers moving out to town areas for better livelihood and educational needs.

25.07.2023 - After Molungkimong, continued the fieldwork in Mopungchuket village again. Staying over in Oko Lima's place again for the course of fieldwork. 3 respondents were interviewed. Schedule 136-138.

26.07.2023 - 5 respondents (139-143) were interviewed.

27.07.2023 - Respondents (144-149) were interviewed.

28.07.2023 - Respondents 150-154 were interviewed.

29.07.2023 - The last batch of respondents from Mopungchuket Village were interviewed. Respondents 155-160. A total of 50 respondents again. Schedule 61-85 and 136-160.

5.08.2023 - The last village to be covered for the field work was in Khar Village. The respondents 191 -167 were interviewed.

7.08.2023 - Respondents 168-173 were interviewed.

9.08.2023 - Respondents 174-179 were interviewed.

10.08.2023 - 7 (180-186) respondents were interviewed.

11.08.2023 - Respondents 187-193 were interviewed.

12.08.2023 - The remaining respondents 194 to 200 were interviewed.

14.08.2023 - After the household interviews, the next step was interviewing the KIIs. Talker with supervisor and updated the work.

16.08.2023 - A list of questions was prepared for KII. The Key informants were Academicians, leaders from different organisations, advocates and individual familiar with the issue and society.

19.08.2023 - All KIIs were scheduled interviews at a place and time of their convenience. The first KI Mrs. Shilula Associate Pastor of Mokokchung Town Baptist Church.

25.08.2023 - 2nd Key Informant Rev. Talijungla. Associate Pastor Ungma Baptist Church.

29.08.2023 -Attended a Webinar 9Secrets of Publishing in high impact factor journals). Talked about IMRAT.

1.09.2023 - 3rd KI Tajungla Longkumer an Advocate.

4.09.2023 - 4th KII Dr, Limasenla Jamir, Asst. Prof. Sociology (Fazl Ali College).

5.09.2023 - 5th KII, Prof. Temjensosang (Nagaland University). 6th KII Prof, Toshimenla Jamir (Nagaland University)

10.09.2023 - 7th KII, Dr. Tiasunep Amri, Asst Prof. Anthropology (Nagaland University).

13.09.2023 - 8th KII, Dr. Lanurenla, Asst. Prof. English (Fazl Ali College).

21.09.2023 - 9th KII. Senka Walling, Editor and Author.

27.09.2023 - 10th KII, Dr. Imlirenla Walling, Principal and Ex President (Ao Women's organisation)

2.10.2023 - 11th KII, L. Opangla Ao, Retired Principal and women's organisation leader.

5.10.2023 - 12th KII, Mrs Sashikala, Associate Prof, Education (Fazl Ali College) and women's organisation member.

30.10.2023 - 13th KII, T. Imsunaro Ao. Associate Prof. Functional English (Fazl Ali College).

1.11.2023 - 14th KII, Adangla Changkija. Associate Prof. Sociology (Fazl Ali College).

15th KII, Mrs Akumyala. Asst. Prof. English (Jubilee Memorial College).

11.11.2023 - An article was prepared and sent to sir “Ao Naga women and inheritance norms: A socio-cultural analysis.”

13.11.2023 - Discussion with the District Dobashi Court Mokokchung.

15.11.2023 - 16th KII, Bendangsenla, Advocate.

7.11.2023 - 4th Progress Report was prepared and presented.

8.12.2023 - Supervisor gave suggestion to make and the article prepared. And changed the title to “Ao Naga Women and Inheritance Norms: A Sociological analysis.”

23.12.2023 - Data transcription has been going on.

27.12.2023 - Applied for Membership at Clark Theological College.

29.02.2024 -Discussion with Ao women’s Organisation.

4.03.2024 -13.03.2023 -10 Day Research Methodology Course (RCM24) organised by National Institute of Technology Nagaland and sponsored by ICSSR.

27.03.2024-28.03.2024 -2 Day National Workshop on Crafting Qualitative Research organised by Dept of Sociology Nagaland University and sponsored by ISS.

4.04.2024 - Reached campus back in Mizoram University again.

9.04.2024 - Meet with supervisor and prepared article according to Journal Specification. Journal of Family Studies.

19.04.2024 - Prepared the article in APA format and submitted the article.

4.05.2024 - Regretfully the article was rejected. Comments were given and discussed with supervisor to address it.

13.05.2024 - Resubmitted the article in Contemporary South Asia.

24.5.2024 - Structuring the qualitative data under the same themes.

25.06.2024 - Started writing Chapter I. focusing on 6 headings.

23.07.2024 - Meet with Supervisor to update the chapter I prepared. Was advised to make sure that there was flow in what I am trying to write.

7.08.2024 - Reworked on Chapter I and updated to sir.

22.08.2024 - Article submitted to CSA was also rejected.

29.09.2024 - Changes given was addressed and submitted to Indian Journal of Public Administration.

15.10.2024 - Article got declined due to high volume of submission.

6.10.2024 - Showed supervisor Chapter II (Review of Literature). Was told to add more reviews on Kinship theory.

26.10.2024 - Moved in to Chapter III. Research Methodology.

4.11.2024 - Supervisor checked the Chapter and told to add pilot study and research experiences.

17.11.2024 - Submitted Article to Journal of North East Indian Studies

21.11.2024 - Started with Data Analysis for SPSS. Data correction and irregularities addressed.

30.11.2024 - Started working on Chapter IV Socio-economic Profile.

4.12.2024 - Showed Supervisor the progress on Chapter IV.

14.12.2024 - Updated the Completed Chapter IV and structured the headings for Chapter V.

2.01.2025 - Submitted Article to EPW.

6.01.2025 - Got review back from EPW to reduce the wording to 7000 words.

17.01.2025 - Started working on Chapter V.

30.01.2025 - Still with chapter V.

7.02.2025 - Finally completed Chapter IV.

15.02.2025 - Meet Supervisor and showed the progress on Chapter V.

23.02.2025 - While analysing the data for chapter V corrections needed were observed and proper corrections needed were done.

10.03.2025-15.03.2025 - Wrote an Article for Contemporary Social Scientist and submitted.

18.03.2025 -Started adding qualitative quotations on the analysis of chapter V.

21.03.2025-22.03.2025 - 1st SANEI Conference at Japfu Christian College. Attended and presented a paper.

11.04.2025 - Table analysis of one of the headings on Chapter V. Takes around 4 table analysis per day.

21.04.2025-26.04.2025 - Short Term Course in Innovative Approaches to Data Collection and Digital Platforms in Social Sciences.

6.05.2025 - Showed Supervisor progress on Chapter V.

25.05.2025 - Article submitted to EPW was rejected again. Made the changes given and **submitted it to Explorations Journal.**

27.05.2025 - Showed Supervisor the progress on Chapter 5 and changed the title of the chapter to “Ownership status, decision making and control.”

6.07.2025 - Completed Chapter V. Created the reference for chapter V and Zotero has been very helpful in it.

11.07.2025 - Started working on Chapter VI. “Barriers to Women’s Access to Property.” Supervisor restructured the title to “Barriers to women’s access to Property.” With 6 headings under it.

1.08.2025 - Been working on Chapter VI. Progress has been easier compared to Chapter V. Did not spend too much time writing and rewriting to make it perfect.

19.08.2025 - Showed Sir the progress done. Yet to finish with Chapter VI.

28.08.2025 - Completed the first draft of Chapter VI. With this I have completed the draft of all the chapters.

2.09.2025 - Started incorporating KII’s in Chapter V. Going through the draft then proceeded to incorporate and supplement with the views from KII. ‘

15.09.2025 - Doing the same in Chapter VI. Incorporating the views of KII.

22.09.2025 - Started with rewriting the overview of Chapter V and VI.

3.10.2025 - Started writing the Summary and Conclusion Chapter VII. Going through all the chapters and started writing the conclusion. One thing worth mentioning is while writing the sociological implications of the study the theories and findings as well as the context made sense. While doing the thematic reviews, there was this constant thought on how to theoretically contextualise the study and was worried about it, but with the progress in the thesis, things slowly came into place. The literatures review made sense, as well as it was possible to contextualise the theories with the findings and the thesis made sense.

8.10.2025 - Showed supervisor the write up of Chapter VII, which included the overview of all the chapters, contextualisation with the literatures, Sociological Implications of the study for which I have created a Table to represent the “**Integrated Theoretical Perspectives and its context for the study**” as well as a Model named “**Ao Women’s Integrated Inheritance Cycle Model (AWIICM)**” to represent the Inheritance rights of Ao Naga Women.

9.10.2025 - Supervisor gave his feedback told to restructure the Model and to add Future areas for research as an additional heading.

11.10.2025 - Finished and sent the changes done to supervisor. With this I have completed all the chapters needed for the thesis.

13.10.2025 - Started doing the corrections and revisions from Chapter I. Did some additions and changes on the writeup. Especially the Overview and statement of the problem. After that proceeded with crosschecking the literature and references cited.

15.10.2025 - Reviewing Chapter II. Literature Review. Updated the literature stock. Added literatures from 2023-2025. In total 237 literatures were used in Chapter II alone. More were added in other Chapters. After that proceeded with Crosschecking the reference list.

18.10.2025 - Started the corrections and modifications on Chapter III. The Methodological Framework. Added points on Research Experience, Data collection, Analysis, ethical steps followed and limitations of the study as well as the references.

21.10.2025 - Proceeded with the corrections and checking of Chapter IV. Socio-Economic Profile of Women in Ao Society. Did the proof reading and the Reference list. Started preparing the PPT for the Pre-Submission as well.

23.10.2025 - Started working on Chapter V “Ownership status, control and decision making”. Did the corrections, reviews and checked reference list.

25.10.2025 - The corrections on Chapter VI “Barriers to women’s access to Property” and the references. And sent The PPT to Sir for checking.

27.10.2025 - Proof read Chapter VII “Summary and Conclusion.” After which proceeded with compiling the chapters and the necessary things to complete the thesis. Talked with supervisor about the PPT prepared. Gave feedback to add the details of Chapter II on Review of Literature and also to highlight the comparison of the findings on developed and underdeveloped villages.

30.10.2025 - Supervisor commented about adding the comparison of developed and underdeveloped villages.

01.11.2025 - Created a table for the comparison and named it as developed and underdeveloped village in context.

03.11.2025 - Meet with supervisor. Updated the comparative made and did corrections. He commented “Use minimum words and make maximum impact”.

04.11.2025 - Made the title page, contents section, appendix, acknowledgement, and compiled the chapters all in one to prepare for the printing.

05.11.2025 - Prepared the Abstract. And complied the thesis.

06.11.2025 - Preparation for the Pre-Submission. Edited the PPT.

07.11.2025 - Pre-Submission Seminar.

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APPENDIX - II

PROPERTY INHERITANCE RIGHTS OF AO NAGA WOMEN

Interview Schedule (Purely for academic purpose)

Schedule No.

Date of Interview:

A. Personal Details:

A. Sub-Division:

B. Administrative Block:

C. Village:

D. Name:

E. Gender: a. Male () b. Female () c. Other ()

1. Age:

1. Below 20 Years () 2. 21 -30Years () 3. 31- 40 Years
4. 41 - 50 Year () 5. Above 50 Years ()

2. Marital Status:

1. Married () 2. Unmarried () 3. Widow ()
4. Divorced () 5. Single ()

3. Religion:

1. Christian () Denomination _____
2. Hindu () 3. Muslim () 4. Buddhist ()
5. Sikh () 6. Other _____

4. Education:

1. Primary () 2. High School () 3. Secondary School ()
4. Graduate () 5. Post Graduate () 6. M.Phil/Ph.D ()
7. Technical () 8. If currently studying then which level: _____

5. Occupation:

1. Employed () 2. Unemployed () 3. Student ()

If employed then, which sector:

1. Government () 2. Private () 3. Self-employed ()

6. Income per month:

1. Below ₹10,000 () 2. ₹10,000 - ₹20,000 () 3. ₹20,000 - ₹30,000 ()
4. ₹30,000 - ₹40,000 () 5. ₹40,000 - ₹50,000 () 6. ₹ 50,000 and above

D. Number of household members: _____

B. Family Details:

Sl no	Name	Relationship with the respondent	Sex	Age	Marital Status	Edn. Qualification	Occupation	Income

C. Nature of Inheritance:

7. Do you own any kind of property

1. Yes () 2. No () 3. No ()

8. What type of property is it?

1. Inherited Property () 2. Acquired Property ()

9. What kind of property do you own?

1. Land () 2. Buildings () 3. Household assets ()
4. Jewelleries ()

10. How was that property acquired?

1. Purchased () 2. Inherited () 3. Govt. Grant/Permit ()
4. Gift () 5. Encroached () 6. Will ()
7. Other -Specify _____

11. Who is eligible to own properties?

1. Inherited Properties: Father/Mother/Son/Daughter/Others -
2. Acquired Properties: Husband/Wife/Son/Daughter/Others-

12. On what basis are they entitled to inherit it?

1. Descent () 2. Head of the household () 3. Clan ()
4. Marriage () 5. Transfer through a will () 6. Nominee ()
7. Other _____

13. Who controls the properties?

1. Inherited Properties: Father/Mother/Husband/Son/Daughter/Others -
2. Acquired Properties: Husband/Wife/Son/Daughter/Others-

14. What determines the nature of ownership?

1. Clan () 2. Descent () 3. Patriarchy ()
4. Kinship () 5. Marriage () 6. Self Acquired ()
7. Other _____

15. How are the properties distributed?

1. Inherited () 2. Deed () 3. Will ()
4. Gift () 5. Others _____

16. Have you received property from your parents?

1. Yes () 2. No () 3. No Idea ()

17. If yes then by which method?

1. Purchased () 2. Inherited () 3. Govt. Grant/Permit ()
4. Gift () 5. Will () 6. No idea ()

18. How much land do you own?

1. Less than one acre () 2. One acre () 3. Two acre ()
4. Three acre () 5. Five acre and more () 6. Non ()

19. What are the factors that influence the total amount of land you own?

1. Education () 2. Income () 3. Age ()
4. Marital Status () 5. Headship of the family ()
6. Others _____

20. Do you have authority to sell or mortgage the landed property which you own?

1. Yes () 2. No () 3. Jointly with husband ()

21. Do you make any decision regarding landed property matter?

1. Yes () 2. No () 3. Jointly with husband ()

If yes, then in what aspect?

1. Selling () 2. Buying () 3. Mortgaging ()
 4. Others _____

22. Do you feel any sense of empowerment as a result of owning property?

1. Yes () 2. No () 3. No Idea ()

23. Do you think property ownership would make/is making any change in your status in the family and society?

1. Yes () 2. No () 3. No idea ()

If yes then, what changes does/would it bring?

1. Living standard in family and society ()
 2. Respect ()
 3. Decision making role ()
 4. Economic development ()
 5. Social and political clout ()

24. Are the properties or resources distributed equally without any discrimination based on gender or status?

1. Yes () 2. No () 3. No Idea ()

25. Does every individual get equal amount of resources or properties distributed?

1. Yes () 2. No. () 3. No Idea ()

26. Are men given more preference when it comes to inheritance?

1. Yes () 2. No () 3. No Idea ()

27. And is it influenced by traditional and Cultural practices?

1. Yes () 2. No () 3. No Idea ()

28. Does society and men superimpose their position on women in the assumed inheritance practice?

1. Yes () 2. No () 3. No ()

29. Do the land tenure and land use practices discriminate against women?

1. Yes () 2. No () 3. No Idea ()

If so, how does this discrimination continue to be supported by formal, informal, and social norms?

1. Prevalence of discriminatory personal laws ()
2. Customary law ()
3. Attitudes and practices or perceptions behind women and men when it comes to rights and opportunities ()
4. Cultural restraints ()

30. Do you think that there is assets gap in women's and men's access to and ownership of property?

1. Yes () 2. N () 3. No Idea ()

31. Does the assets gap arise mainly because of gender ideologies and beliefs that people have about gender roles?

- (1) Yes () 2. No () 3. No Idea ()

32. Do you think that the existing and prevailing norms should change and that everyone irrespective of their gender or position should get equal rights to property and inheritance?

1. Yes () 2. No () 3. No Idea ()

33. Are negative sanctions imposed when one goes against the set norms or practice of inheritance?

1. Yes () 2. No () 3. No Idea ()

D. Bargaining power:

34. Are you facing any problem in family due to lack of property?

1. Yes () 2. No () 3. NO idea ()

If yes then, what?

1. Torture form the husband ()
2. Lack of respect from the family ()
3. Lack of respect from the society ()
4. Others. Specify ()

35. The significance of landed property in the lives of women?

1. Less likely to experience economic vulnerability ()
2. Bargaining power ()

- 3. More decision making and political clout ()
- 4. Enhance the welfare and well-being of women and their families ()
- 5. All of the above ()

36. To what extent would land ownership empower women within the family?

- 1. Economic power ()
- 2. Access to important marketplaces for commerce ()
- 3. The capacity to negotiate inside the home ()
- 4. Social access to non-market institutions like household and local government structures ()
- 5. Others –

37. Do women holding land engage more in household decision making than those with no ownership?

- 1. Yes () 2. No () 3. No Idea ()

E. What is your perceptions and idea towards women having the right to inherit properties?

38. What effect would women's land ownership have on bargaining power?

- 1. Financial security to women ()
- 2. Reduces gender discrimination by giving women more control over decisions that affect their lives ()
- 3. Higher investment in human capital such as education, health, and nutrition
- 4. Political and social inclusion ()
- 5. All of the above ()

39. Do you think that a home or piece of land physically conveys the strength of a woman's fallback position and visible escape opportunities, acting as a deterrent to marital violence?

- 1. Yes () 2. No () 3. No Idea ()

40. Do you think that property inheritance rights would secure your life and future generation?

- 1. Yes () 2. No () 3. No idea ()

41. Do you feel that legal property ownership may provide overall development of women?

1. Yes () 2. No () 3. No idea ()

42. Would property ownership empower and encourage women in the fight against repression?

1. Yes () 2. No () 3. No Idea ()

E. Conflict over property and inheritance:

43. Do disputes arise between siblings over inheritance issues?

1. Yes () 2. No () 3. No Idea ()

If yes, what are the main reasons that lead to siblings in dispute over inheritance?

44. Do you think that there would be an increase in the prevalence and correlation of both physical and psychological violence with women fighting for equal rights?

1. Yes () 2. No () 3. No Idea ()

G. What results would occur as a result of the increased dispute over property within the family?

45. Do you feel that women fighting for equal rights can also serve as a platform for the expression or exacerbation of tensions that already exist in families?

1. Yes () 2. No () 3. No Idea ()

46. Do men misuse their control over family property?

1. Yes () 2. No () 3. No Idea ()

47. If yes, does prevailing norms uphold that sources of male power and authority?

1. Yes () 2. No () 3. No Idea ()

48. And does domestic violence occur as a result of women daring to fight or going against the said norm?

1. Yes () 2. No () 3. No Idea ()

49. Do you think you are capable of handle immovable property equally with your husband/ brothers, etc.?

1. Yes () 2. No () 3. No idea ()

H. If yes, why? Give reasons

50. Are you involved in any dispute relating land disputes?

1. Yes () 2. No () 3. No idea ()

If 'yes' what is the nature of land dispute?

1. Encroached by others ()

2. Interstate succession ()

3. Testate ()

4. Other ()

F. Barriers to women inheritance:

51. Have you ever been deprived of your lawful right to property?

1. Yes () 2. No () 3. No Idea ()

52. Do you know any instances where your female neighbor/anyone you know of were deprived of property ownership?

1. Yes () 2. No () 3. No Idea ()

53. Are women are often barred from exercising their land rights simply because they are women?

1. Yes () 2. No () 3. No Idea ()

54. Do you think that women frequently have greater challenges than males in exercising their rights?

1. Yes () 2. No () 3. No Idea ()

55. Does gender play any role in gaining access to property or inheritance rights?

1. Yes () 2. No () 3. No Idea ()

56. How does gender affect the perceived ownership and inheritance of land and property rights?

1. Women do not enjoy the same level of rights to own land and property as men ()
2. Women own less land than men whether solely or jointly ()
3. When women do own land, plot sizes are smaller ()
4. Less valuable and productive ()
5. Other

57. Do you think that women do not have the same access to property rights as males and are restricted by legislative requirements or discriminatory practices?

1. Yes () 2. No () 3. No Idea ()

58. Are women less likely to be protected by formal or customary law due to gender bias?

1. Yes () No () 3. No Idea ()

59. Do you think property inheritance rights are denied to woman by?

1. Customs () 2. Conventional practices () 3. Norms and value ()
4. Other _____

60. Whether such custom and practices become the hindrances in getting property rights?

1. Yes () 2. No () 3. No idea ()

61. According to our tradition, females do not inherit, because

1. Women are not entitled to own property ()
2. Females go out of house/clan after marriage ()
3. Male preference ()
4. Other _____

62. Do you think cultural barriers against women owning land are more potent than legal laws enabling it?

1. Yes () 2. No () 3. No Idea ()

I. What particular elements help or hinder women's access to and control over landed property?

63. Do prevalence of traditional attitudes and practices make it difficult for women to obtain property rights?

1. Yes () 2. No () 3. No Idea ()

64. Do you feel that Local and customary institutions have shown to be the strongest biases against women's control over resources?

1. Yes () 2. No () 3. No Idea ()

65. Do you think that the traditional customs have generally stayed untouched, thereby preventing women from owning land or having rights that would allow them to do so?

1. Yes () 2. No () 3. No Idea ()

66. Is Patriarchy and conservative social set-up as one persistent barrier to women's land ownership?

1. Yes () 2. No () 3. No Idea ()

67. When confronted with the constraints of a patriarchal structure, do you think that women find themselves in a different position in terms of their power and ability to pursue property claims?

1. Yes () 2. No () 3. No Idea ()

68. Do you feel that the threat of poverty and insecurity drive women to remain in violent relationships or to engage in behaviors, such as unprotected sex?

1. Yes () 2. No () 3. No Idea ()

69. Do you think that property inheritance rights are necessary for women?

1. Yes () 2. No () 3. No Idea ()

70. Do you think women should not demand share of property? Do you agree?

1. Yes () 2. No () 3. No Idea ()

71. Do you feel that fear is also a barrier to women's land ownership?

1. Yes () 2. No () 3. No Idea ()

72. Are women less likely to be aware of their exact rights?

1. Yes () 2. No () 3. No Idea ()

73. Do women need more additional support in the form of legal empowerment?

1. Yes () 2. No () 3. No Idea ()

74. Do you think there is a need to bring changes in the property inheritance system?

1. Yes () 2. No () 3. No idea ()

G. Civil Societies efforts:

J. How can government and non-government organizations promote women's land rights/ support women's efforts to obtain properties?

75. Do you think that it is important to translate laws into local languages, as well as to publish information in local newspapers so as to increase awareness about women's rights to access, use and control over land and other productive resources?

1. Yes () 2. No () 3. No Idea ()

76. Do you feel that most NGOs are reluctant to engage in the difficulties of having to address issues of land and property for women?

1. Yes () 2. No () 3. No Idea ()

K. Can you provide some additional information of the various activities that NGO's have undertaken to empower the women in inheriting properties?

PROPERTY INHERITANCE RIGHTS OF AO NAGA WOMEN

Interview Schedule (Purely for academic purpose)

KII No.

Date of Interview:

Respected Ma'am.

My name is **Takolong Kichu**, a **Research Scholar in the Department of Sociology** from **Mizoram University**. The title of my thesis is **“Property Inheritance Rights of Ao Naga Women”**. I am currently doing my fieldwork and I would like to interview you for my data. The questions asked will all be voluntary and if any of the questions encroach upon your privacy and you don't want to respond then you have every right to do so.

I as a research scholar being aware of the research ethics, will abide by the norms and make sure that respondent's confidentiality will be maintained and that the responses gained will be used purely for academic purpose.

Thanking you for your time.

Yours Faithfully

Takolong Kichu.

Ph No.: 8732889739

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Key informant interviews

A. Name:

B. Age:

C. Occupation:

D. Date of Interview:

1. What is the historical perspective of Women and Property rights in Ao society?
2. How different is it today from the past?
3. Do the Ao's have self-governing property inheritance system? Yes/no? If yes please tell us about it?
4. Do the Ao's have customary property inheritance laws for women in your community? Yes/No
5. If yes, could you please elaborate in detail:
6. Are you aware that the world and Indian Government passed property inheritance laws in their constitution allowing women to inherit properties? Yes/ no
7. What is the general level of awareness of women with regards to the provisions in the constitution concerning their rights?
8. How does this awareness affect their ability to exploit the rights available to them in the constitution?
9. Do you think women should not demand share in properties? Do you agree?
10. Do you think that property inheritance right is necessary for women?
11. In your opinion what are the main barriers hindering women from exercising their land rights to inherit properties?
12. Do various customs and practices become hindrances in getting property rights for women?
13. Do you think property inheritance laws would empower women economically, politically culturally and socially in your opinion

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1	Tribe Gender and Property Inheritance Trijunction: Situating Ao Naga Women From Global to Local	ATSK Journal of Sociology. Vol 3 (1). 95-104. 2025	ISSN: 3005-3676	Single author
2	Negotiating Tradition and Change: Ao Naga Women Navigating Property Rights in the Global Era	Contemporary Social Scientist. Vol 17 (1). 88-95. 2025	ISSN: 2230-956X	Single author
3	Customary Law, Gender Role and Property Inheritance: Perspectives of Ao Women Elites of Mokokchung	Explorations, ISS e-journal. Vol. 9 (3).148-167. 2025	ISSN: 2581-5741	Single author

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Sl. No.	Title of the Paper	Title of Workshop/Seminar	Organised by	National/ International
1	A comparative study of Mizo and Naga women's inheritance rights	Narratives, Developments & Ongoing Issues in Mizoram 18 th -19 th May 2023	Department of Sociology; Pachhunga University College	National
2	The Interaction of Norms and Culture in a Globalised World: A study of Ao women's Inheritance Rights	Indigeneity & Sustainable Development: Locating the Local in the context of G20 30 th -31 st May 2023	Department of Sociology; Mizoram University ICSSR Sponsored	National
3	Customary Law, Gender Role and Property Inheritance: Grounded Perspective of Tribal Ao Women in Northeast	1 st Conference of Sociology Association of North Eastern India (SANEI) 21 st – 22 nd March 2025	SANEI At Japfu Christian College	National

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Sl. No.	Title of Seminars/Workshops/Courses	Place	Year
1	Imperial Hegemony and Subaltern Resistance in Mizoram and Subaltern and India's Freedom Struggle (1 Day)	Mizoram University	2021
2	Research Publication and Ethics (7 Days)	UGC, Human Resource Development Centre, Mizoram University	2021
3	Application and Relevance of Quantitative and Qualitative Methods in Indian Social Science Research ICSSR Sponsored Ten-Day Research Methodology Course, RMC24) (10 Days)	National Institute of Technology Nagaland	2024
4	National Workshop on Crafting Qualitative Research (2 Days)	Nagaland University	2024
5	Innovative Approaches to Data Collection and Digital Platforms in Social Science Research (6 Days)	Mizoram University	2025
6	Qualitative Research Methods: Applied Concerns (1 Day)	Mizoram University	2025



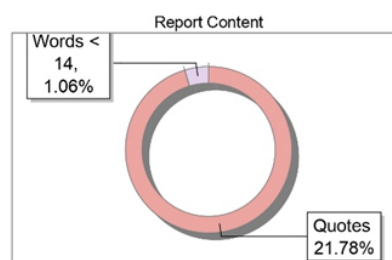
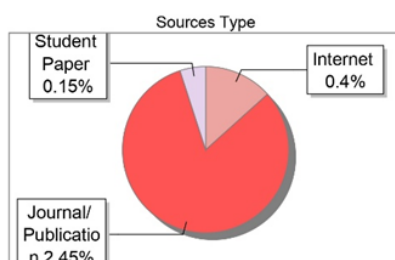
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ABSTRACT

PROPERTY INHERITANCE RIGHTS OF AO NAGA WOMEN

**AN ABSTRACT SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR
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This Thesis examines the property inheritance rights of Ao Naga Women. Property, in all of its forms, is regarded and recognized as the primary asset or key element in determining and enhancing a person's socioeconomic standing in all societies. But not only do men and women have different access to the properties, women have historically faced greater challenges to obtain equal inheritance rights due to firmly established cultural practices, legislative limits, and patriarchal norms. These barriers vary differently across different regions and societies, reflecting diverse social, political, economic, and historical contexts. Traditional norms and practices favour men when it comes to inheritance especially with regards to land, which is tied to male lineage and authority. In tribal societies, the kinship system and customary laws further reinforce the exclusion of women from inheritance rights. This is evident in the case of the Ao Naga women who do not have the right to inherit ancestral property. As the world strive for gender equality, this study on 'Property Inheritance rights of Ao Naga Women,' engages with the question of why Ao Naga women are not allowed to inherit ancestral property and how they perceive this exclusion. The study thus provides a broader understanding of the property inheritance through a gendered lens, which is divided into 7 chapters. It examines the socio-economic profile of Ao women, their ownership status, control and decision making, and the barriers they face in claiming their inheritance rights. The study further highlights the thoughts and perspectives of Ao women on the prevailing inheritance practice, and the role that NGO's and civil societies can do to address the issue. By doing so, this study seeks to situate the local reality within the discussion on gender, customary law, and property inheritance rights, thereby contributing to an understanding of Ao women's position within the wider global context.

Chapter I consist of the Introduction of the study, while chapter II deals with the Review of Literature. Chapter III covers the Methodological Framework of the study and Chapter IV delved into the Socio-Economic Profile of the sampled respondents. Chapter V examines the Ownership status, control and decision making of Ao women when it comes to properties and Chapter VI deals with the Barriers to their inheritance rights and the role that NGO's and Civil societies can do to address the issue, while Chapter VII summed up the study towards contextualising and conclusion.

Chapter I: Introduction

A general introduction of the study has been done under seven headings, introducing the concept of property which is taken as land for this study, and understanding the terms such as tribe and gender and its intersection. Tribal societies have unique political systems, family

bonds, kinship ties and communal land tenure system. They also have typical gender divisions and cultural norms associated with gender, assigning different rights and privileges. This intersection of tribe and gender is intricate and the exclusion of women's rights such as property inheritance often reinforce gender inequality, limiting their economic independence and perpetuating subordinate social position within their society. This relationship gets more complicated with the prevalence of customary laws and traditional practices. In tribal societies, the customary law is essential for shaping the social fabric, however, it maintains gender hierarchies and disparities, which is especially true when it comes to land and its inheritance. All these gender norms and customary laws in tribal societies is influenced by patriarchy often perpetuated through the existing customs, traditions and beliefs, frequently limiting women's rights and opportunities. Besides that, in this first chapter, under the heading 'Gender and Property Inheritance,' the intersection of customary laws, societal norms, gender expectations and patriarchy, which affects women's right to property and inheritance, highlights the inheritance practices and women's rights of the global scenario, the national, north-east and finally coming down to Ao Naga inheritance practice, where Ao women neither have the right to own property nor inherit it. Therefore, the 'Property Inheritance Rights of Ao Naga Women' has been carried forward.

Chapter II: Review of Literature

This chapter relates to the review of literature for the study, focusing particularly on women's right to inherit property and its related issues. The literature reviewed has been divided into three headings: Theoretical Perspectives; Methodological Review and concluding with Thematic reviews. The theoretical perspectives consist of Six Theories: The Gender Theory of Inheritance; Kinship Theories of Descent and Alliance; Social Exchange Theory; Symbolic Interactionism; Conflict Perspective and the Human Rights Approach. All these theoretical perspectives reviewed and utilised in the study provide a greater understanding of gendered inheritance practice and contextualising the findings of the study from a theoretical perspective.

The Gender Theory of Inheritance postulates how a women's gender affects her rights because of patriarchal traditions, socio-cultural norms and traditional practices that marginalise women in society. The Kinship theory of Descent and Alliance highlights why patriarchal inheritance developed and how the kinship and marriage practices perpetuate patriarchy and gender difference and how lineage, status and group cohesion are maintained in a society. The Social Exchange and Symbolic Interactionism further point out that because of unfair exchange as a

result of the symbolic meaning attached to land, shape the inheritance rights and this leads to conflict where the conflict perspective highlights how inheritance becomes a male privilege of power and scarce resources. The Human Rights Based Approach further highlights the policy recommendations and equal rights-based advocacy. But despite its prevalence and various international and national policies and efforts, Ao women still internalise the inheritance practice, opining that only men should have the right to inherit property, perpetuating their exclusion themselves. These theoretical perspectives thereby provide a foundation and help in understanding the study more clearly.

Under the Methodological Review, the methods and techniques applied by previous researchers on similar themes have been examined to help in formulating the methodological framework of the study. The previous researchers have utilised several qualitative and quantitative approaches, which have been proven effective and as such, the current study employs descriptive and exploratory research design, exploratory comparative analysis, interview schedule, case study, Key Informant Interviews and Focus Group Discussions. Thus, the study is largely qualitative in nature and need based quantitative data have been used to supplement and enrich the study.

The thematic review was classified into eight themes which are: Property rights and gender; Women and land ownership; Female Bargaining Power; Family conflict over inheritance of properties; Barriers to women's property inheritance; Women and property inheritance in customary laws; Legal dimensions and property inheritance and lastly, Women's inheritance under MDGs and SDGs. The different themes reviewed offers an insight into the property rights of women, the benefits of such rights, the barriers or obstacles to such rights, the conflict involved and also the legal dimensions related to such rights and practices. This in-turn helped in identifying the key concepts to be used and concluded the chapter with the research gap identified for the present study.

Chapter III: Methodological Framework

The details of the methodology adopted and the procedures and techniques followed in the study are highlighted in this chapter. It starts with the objectives for the study, followed by the Research Design to Operationalisation of Concepts, the Universe and Sample selection, the principle of exclusion and inclusion and the sources of data. It further entails the Research Experience and Data Collection, the Data Analysis, Research Ethics followed and limitations of the study.

Based on the research gap identified, the study proceeded with the following objectives:

1. To understand the nature of inheritance of Ao Naga women.
2. To analyse the socio-economic profile of women in Ao society.
3. To examine and compare the status of Ao women in developed and underdeveloped villages in terms of property ownerships.
4. To study the factors that act as barriers and impede women's access to inheritance of properties.
5. To examine the societal efforts enhancing women's standing on property inheritance.

The present study thus follows a descriptive cum exploratory and comparative research design, with Mokokchung District as the Universe for the purpose of this study. For selecting the sample, the study employs a non-probability and purposive sampling technique to select a total of 50 households each from 4 villages leading to a total sample of 200 respondents to carry out household surveys, broadly representing the universe of the study. For the selection of the 4 villages, multi-stage sampling process was employed. In the first stage, 2 sub-divisions were identified from the 4 sub-divisions and classified into a developed and underdeveloped subdivision. In the second stage, 4 administrative circles were identified from the 2 selected sub-divisions. On the third stage, 4 villages were identified and termed as developed and underdeveloped villages. Ungma and Mopungchuket as Developed villages and Khar and Molungkimong as Underdeveloped villages.

Besides the 200 sampled respondents, 20 key Informants were identified purposively and interviewed to get deeper insights, because of their intimate knowledge and experience on the issue. 14 key informants were females while the remaining 6 were male respondents to facilitate the male perspective as well. Moreover, 15 of them hold respectable government jobs as professors and Academicians and few were actively participating as members of the Watsu Mungdang, 2 were Advocates, 2 Church Workers, and lastly an eminent writer and editor of the local newspaper.

The data for the study was mainly primary data collected through interview schedule, KII and FGDs. Upon the completion of the field work, the schedules collected were scrutinised and coding was done for the quantitative data which was then analysed through SPSS. The qualitative data obtained have been used as narratives and quotations which are phenomenological and ethnographic in nature. The chapter concludes with the research ethics followed and limitations of the study that have been encountered.

Chapter IV: Socio-economic Profile

Chapter IV in this study is oriented towards finding out the socio-economic profile of Ao women in Mokokchung District, Nagaland. In terms of Age, respondents between the age of 41-50 years were more in Developed villages, while in Underdeveloped villages respondents were more from the age group of 50 and above. This group of respondents who were 40 and above, were in their peak earning period, more settled with their family income and socioeconomic activities, and few could acquire properties jointly with their husbands or either on their own. Moreover, in both the developed and underdeveloped villages, the age group of 21-30 years comprised the least number of respondents and does not own any acquired properties, as this age group does not have the means or the income to acquire properties, nor could they inherit any ancestral or clan properties. This age distribution reflects not only potential socio-economic differences, but also have its effects on the marital status as well.

About the marital status, majority of the women from both the developed and underdeveloped villages were married, as among the households selected, most of the respondents interviewed were either wives or mothers. Apart from the married respondents, there were 8 respondents from underdeveloped villages and a one from a developed village who were of marriageable age but remained unmarried and were considered spinsters. A single case of a divorced respondent from an underdeveloped village is also included in this study and there were 36 respondents who were single at the time of the study and were not involved in any romantic relationship. Notably, none of the unmarried, divorced or single women respondents did not own any property. Widowed respondents were also present, with eight respondents from developed villages and 11 from underdeveloped villages. Among them, 4 had acquired property jointly with their late husband. However, the majority of property owners were married respondents, who had combined their income and resources with their spouses to acquire property, a process, which is more challenging for other marital categories (Grinstein-Weiss et al., 2011).

The respondents and households interviewed for the study belonged to nuclear families, reflecting the cultural norms of Ao society, where after the marriage the newly married couple often starts their own family away from their parents, contributing to the prevalence of nuclear family structure. Household size also ranged from a single-member to eight-member families, with four-member households being the most common with 39 from developed and 30 households from underdeveloped villages. Thus, the size of the family is typically on a smaller

frame with the husband, wife and two offsprings as the most common among the AOs. With regards to the number of dependent family members within the household, it varied from zero to seven family members, with families having two dependents accounting for the largest group of 78 households (41 developed and 37 underdeveloped). Furthermore, the Naga's and AO's in general follows a patrilineal system, which reinforce and perpetuate patriarchal norms and attitudes, that negatively impacting women's social status (Nukshirenla & Dhanaraju, 2021). In the context of the present study, it was also observed that none of the women respondents were recognized as heads of their household. Instead, this role was always held by the husbands or fathers.

The respondents living arrangements and housing conditions varied between Kuccha, Semi Pucca and Pucca houses, as well as between the developed and underdeveloped villages. Respondents with kuccha houses were more in underdeveloped villages as compared to developed villages, while majority of the respondents from both developed and underdeveloped resided in semi-pucca houses with 129 households. However, respondents living in pucca houses were more from developed villages (22) as compared to 16 respondents from underdeveloped villages. The type of accommodation directly reflects the respondent's socioeconomic standing, with respondents in kuccha dwellings is often known to encounter greater financial difficulties, limiting their access to resources and properties. In contrast, residents dwelling in pucca houses seem to have better economic stability and as such greater access to different amenities. Notably, the dominance of semi-pucca houses, highlights the transitional nature of families striving to improve both their living and economic conditions.

Household assets owned also provided insights into the socio-economic conditions of the respondents. The household assets included televisions, mobile phones, refrigerators, washing machines, gas/induction stoves, computers/laptops and livestock owned. Assets like mobile phone were universally owned by all of the respondents primarily out of necessity, while gas stoves were owned by 184 households. Ownership of assets like televisions, refrigerators, washing machines and computer/laptops varied significantly, with household from developed villages owning more of these items as compared to underdeveloped villages. However, when it comes to owning livestock, 77 households from underdeveloped villages reared livestock such as pigs and hens, compared to 25 households in developed villages reflecting different economic priorities and lifestyles. Livestock provides income, food, and security in underdeveloped villages, playing a crucial role in subsistence living, while households in

developed regions have better access to alternative resources and employment opportunities, explaining the variations in assets ownership.

Nagas and Ao's in general are predominantly a Christian-dominated state. A fact reflected in the study where all the respondents identified as Baptists. The influence of religion extends beyond spiritual life to education and social development. In the case of the Ao community, American Baptist missionaries promoted and emphasized on the value of education as a means for personal and community development, thereby influencing the socio-economic standing as well. Moreover, in the *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Durkheim (1915) contends that religion stems from clan loyalty and identity. Religion's rituals and ceremonies serve to reinforce the communal bonds and shared identities. This perspective aligns with the inheritance practice of the Aos, where land functions as an important symbol of clan solidarity and identity. Similar to religious activities, attachment to ancestral land reflects a collective conscience and acts as a unifying force within the community. Land inheritance governed by customary laws, not only maintains the social fabric but also reflects the cultural identity of the Ao people.

In terms of education, the data indicated that the educational level of the respondents is quite high with respondents having their high school, higher secondary school and graduate degrees. However, graduates were more in developed villages while the ones with the high school degrees were more in underdeveloped villages. The benefits of improved infrastructure, and access to educational facilities showed its impact in the developed villages. In contrast, underdeveloped villages reflect structural hurdles such as economic, geographical challenges and proper infrastructures for higher academic progression. There were also 12 post-graduates among the respondents and one with a Ph.D. degree from a developed village in this study. Overall, the educational level of the respondents is quite high, with the educational qualification having significant impact on the socio-economic outcomes.

109 respondents were found to be employed, with a higher proportion coming from developed villages as compared to underdeveloped villages. Similarly, students who were currently studying were also more from developed villages as such villages had more respondents available who could be interviewed and were currently pursuing their graduate and post-graduate degrees, due to the availability of college and university close to them facilitating their access to higher education. 78 respondents were seen to be unemployed and among those, the respondents were more from underdeveloped villages again. They were mostly housewives

dependent or their husbands or doing menial works to earn something. This higher unemployment rate in underdeveloped villages reflects the socio-economic issues these communities face, such as limited work opportunities, lower educational attainment and access, reliance on subsistence farming and informal labour markets, further underscoring the economic disparities.

Among those 109 respondents who were employed, 49 respondents were employed in government jobs, while 25 were employed in private enterprises and the remaining 35 were self-employed. Notably, in all those three categories the respondents from developed villages were found to be more. Moreover, government sector and employment remain a pillar of economic stability and employment in both developed and underdeveloped villages, providing financial security and social benefits. Self-employment also provides an alternative for many households, particularly in underdeveloped villages where employment prospects are limited. All these employment opportunities and the income as a subsequent result of it determines a women's opportunity and the only possible way to acquire properties either on their own or along with their spouses, as Ao women do not have any right to inherit ancestral clan properties.

In terms of income, it was classified into seven categories, ranging from below ₹10,000 to ₹51,000 and above. Notably, the modal income or the most prevalent income bracket falls within (₹21,000-₹30,000) per month amongst 46 respondents, representing middle-income earners, including individuals employed in low level government jobs or the private sector, and some self-employed entrepreneurs. Only one single respondent from an underdeveloped village was seen to be earning less than ₹10,000 per month. The next income range (₹11,000-₹20,000) accounted for 32 respondents, who were primarily self-employed with traditional livelihoods such as farming, small-scale businesses, and handicrafts or informal jobs. The income bracket of (₹31,000-₹40,000 and ₹41,000-₹50,000) each accounted for 12 respondents, with developed villages being more (7 respondents) as compared to underdeveloped villages (5 respondents) in both the income categories. The highest income bracket, (₹51,000 and above) with only six respondents, five from developed villages and only one from an underdeveloped village. These respondents typically belong to households with greater financial stability, who earn their income primarily through higher-level government jobs. Overall, the monthly income distribution of the respondents reveals significant economic disparities between the developed and underdeveloped villages. Developed villages have a higher concentration of respondents in the middle- and upper-income groups, indicating greater access to steady and lucrative employment opportunities. In contrast, underdeveloped villages

are characterized by lower-income households and a higher frequency of unemployment, emphasising the lack of opportunities and amenities available to them.

The family income distribution among the respondents also revealed stark differences shaped by their marital status. Married respondents formed the majority (135 individuals), with a significant proportion (79 respondents) falling within the medium-income bracket of ₹21,000–₹50,000. Interestingly, underdeveloped villages accounted for a higher number of married individuals in this income range. On the other hand, married respondents belonging to the high-income category (above ₹51,000), were predominantly more in developed villages. In contrast, unmarried, widowed, divorced, and single respondents exhibited greater financial vulnerability. Among unmarried individuals, most of the respondents fall within the medium-income range, and the widowed respondents were predominantly concentrated in the low-income bracket, with none in the high-income category, highlighting the economic precarity faced by women without spousal support. Moreover, the sole divorced respondent also falls within the low-income group, further illustrating the challenges faced by women in this category. Single respondents and the income of their families however, showed a more balanced distribution, with majority of their families in the medium-income range. Thus, developed villages in Mokokchung District and among the Aos consistently demonstrate better income outcomes across all marital categories, while underdeveloped villages reflected higher instances of financial hardship. All these income patterns have a direct implication for land ownership.

In terms of land ownership, only 21 women reported owning land, with 17 respondents from developed villages and only four from underdeveloped villages having acquired properties. Notably, none of the respondents reported owning ancestral clan land, which reflects the traditional practice and the inheritance system of the Ao Nagas, that prohibits women from inheriting or holding ancestral and clan land. Instead, the women have acquired their properties by purchasing it or through other means, indicating that land ownership among the women in Ao society is primarily a result of individual economic efforts rather than that of inheritance. Moreover, the disparity of land owners among the respondents between the developed and underdeveloped villages is a result of the socio-economic differences such as education, employment and income as stated by Katz and Chamorro (2003), which play a vital role in the capability of acquiring the properties.

Doss et al., (2015) stated that women are five times less likely than men to own land, and even if they own land, it is often smaller in size. This study also shows that among the land owners, the size of the land owned was rather small as well. The land holdings varied from less than *1 Bigha* to *3 Bighas*, with *1 Bigha* approximately equal to 14,400 square feet (1,337.8 square meters). Notably, land holding size of *1 Bigha*, with 11 respondents was the most common size of the land owned, with eight of these respondents from developed villages, and three from underdeveloped villages. Ownership of land larger than *1 Bigha* decreased significantly, with only 5 respondents owning *2 Bighas*, and just one respondent owning *3 Bighas of land*, and all of whom are from developed villages. Additionally, four respondents owned less than *1 Bigha* with three respondents from developed villages and only one from an underdeveloped village. The size of land owned not only served as a significant indicator of the economic standing and access to essential resources, but also highlights the differences in landholdings among women landowners themselves as well as the differences within the developed and underdeveloped villages. This dominance of non-landowners in both developed and underdeveloped villages as well as the smaller size of land owned, highlights the larger issues of gender inequality in land ownership and property inheritance in Ao Naga society.

Chapter V: Ownership status, control and decision-making

This chapter examined the complexities of inheritance practice through a gendered lens, focusing on how traditional practices, societal attitudes, and customary laws shape the inheritance practices and rights of women in Ao society. By comparing the disparities and challenges between developed and underdeveloped villages, this chapter provided a deeper understanding of women's status regarding the property ownership. As such, the perspectives, thoughts, and opinions of Ao Naga women from the sampled villages were explored under 5 themes.

In terms of property ownership status, only 21 out of 200 respondents (17 from developed and 4 from underdeveloped villages) owned property. Notably, the properties they owned were self-acquired property rather than ancestral clan properties. This clearly indicated that women in Ao society are restricted from owning ancestral clan properties, and it aligns with the works of Agarwal, (2003); Allendorf, (2007) and Alkire et al., (2013), who stated that women face persistent discrimination in access to land throughout different societies. The narrative of Respondent 17 from an underdeveloped village helps to understand this:

“In our society, women do neither own nor even think about inheriting ancestral properties. These rights are reserved for men alone, whether we want it or not. Our norms and traditional values are attached to it and this have been practised and handed down for generations.”

Moreover, among the property owners, the type of property they owned included land along with buildings and different household assets. The respondents had acquired those properties either by inheriting their parents' acquired properties or through their personal financial efforts and capabilities, enabling them to construct their homes and purchase essential belongings. In contrast to the minority who owned property, it was found that the greater majority of 179 respondents, 83 from developed villages and 96 from underdeveloped villages, did not own any property at all. This inequality draws attention to the ingrained socio-economic and cultural barriers that prevents women in Ao society from having access to ancestral properties.

When it comes to the factors that influence property ownership in Ao society, the different means through which the respondents have acquired their property, specifically, the process of acquisition, eligibility criteria, and determinants of ownership were examined and explored. The means through which the respondents have acquired their property in Ao society was primarily through purchase, given through a will, or by being permitted to own or utilise the property. Notably, the most common means of acquiring land was by purchasing it, accounting for 15 respondents (13 from developed and 2 from underdeveloped villages). 3 respondents (1 from developed and 2 from underdeveloped villages), reported owning property through permission. Ao women cannot own or inherit ancestral properties, but they are granted temporary rights to land under certain conditions, such as widowhood, and these rights remain conditional and do not translate into actual ownership. As such, the 3 respondents were given temporary rights to own the property through permission and is often rare. Moreover, the remaining 3 respondents which were all from developed villages had acquired their properties by inheriting their parents' acquired properties through Will. These accounts help to understand how properties are acquired by women in Ao society, emphasizing that ownership is often achieved through purchase rather than inheritance. The key factors that enabled the means to acquire the property was through economic independence particularly through personal income playing a significant role for 6 respondents from developed villages. Beyond the personal income, marital status along with their income played the greatest role on property acquisition for 9 respondents, with seven respondents from developed villages and two from underdeveloped villages, highlighting that their marriages enabled them to pool resources and

acquire property jointly with their husbands. Thus, while personal income allows some women to evade restrictive customary practices and acquire properties on their own, marriage and economic collaboration with their spouses play an equally crucial role in enabling access to property.

The eligibility to own ancestral property in Ao society is often dependent on the kinship status, family relations and patriarchy. These conditions usually place women at a disadvantage, making it difficult for them to own or inherit properties. In the case of this study, the husbands of the respondents (135), their fathers (45), sons (19) and a case of a nephew were the ones who were eligible to own the ancestral properties. Men automatically have ownership rights over ancestral land by virtue of them being men and members of the clan, and it shows a universal consensus on gender disparity, as no Ao women were considered to be eligible to own ancestral property. A key informant commented:

“We cannot always blame negatively about our Sobaliba (Ao traditions, customs and ethical values). There are some good and some bad practices. But when it comes to inheritance, only men have the right to ancestral properties. I strongly stand and agree with that. As a result of the prevailing practice, our lineage, traditions and practices are maintained and remains unaltered. Because of it we have a very clean sobaliba.”

These perspectives highlighted that the eligibility to own ancestral property in Ao society is significantly influenced by marital and kinship relations, as well as the patriarchal nature of Ao society where property ownership is tied to male lineage and traditional social norms of the society.

When it comes to the elements that determines the nature of ownership, the study observed that the majority of the respondents (144) hold a predominant perspective on clan, descent, and patriarchal frameworks working together to determine the ownership rights in Ao society. This highlights the deep-rooted influence of traditional inheritance system that prioritise collective familial affiliations and male-centred property transmission. Respondent 40 from a developed village simply stated:

“It has been the practice since our forefathers. Clan land or property is with men and the privilege or right remains with their descendants who are men.”

In contrast, 17 respondents attributed it solely to clan, while 15 attributed it to patriarchy, opining that these elements work independently rather than in conjunction with each other. Remarkably, respondents from underdeveloped village emphasised more on these factors compared to respondents from developed villages. Respondent 11 from an underdeveloped village mentioned:

“There is no individual ownership of land. It is community and clan-based ownership, and parents do not have the right to let their daughters inherit those properties, as only male descendants of the clan can inherit it. I believe that is the only reason we women do not inherit land.”

Interestingly, beside those perspectives, 24 respondents believed that property ownership is instead determined by a combination of descent, marriage, and self-acquisition. While still less significant than the dominant determinants, this group of respondents reflects a growing recognition of individual property acquisition through marriage and personal efforts, indicating a shift towards more flexible ownership determinants rather than depending on ancestral property. Respondent 51 from a developed village who acquired property jointly with her husband stated:

“I have seen cases where women acquire property through marriage or personal earnings. While traditional norms still influence inheritance, factors such as our income and marriage offer more opportunities for independent land ownership. I personally own a plot of land jointly that I acquired with my husband, something that wouldn't have been possible in the traditional inheritance practices.”

Overall, the study highlights the predominant role of clan, descent, patriarchy and customary practices in determining the ownership rights to property in Ao society, reflecting a widely accepted belief that property ownership is a culturally driven practice sustained across generations.

In the distribution and control of property, the basis of entitlement to inheritance, its distribution and who controls the properties were examined to gain a better understanding of how property is inherited and controlled in Ao society. For the basis of entitlement to inheritance, the majority of 158 respondents recognised the role of clan and lineage as the primary basis for inheritance rights. The study thus highlights the deep-rooted tradition of collective ownership of land in Ao society, where inheritance is not an individual entitlement

but rather a structured transmission of property within familial and clan members. Gender as an independent determinant of inheritance rights, was also observed in the study with 38 respondents sharing this perspective. The respondents of the study opined that the gender or being born as a male or female in society plays a crucial role in deciding one's entitlement to inheritance, even before the lineage or clan considerations come into play. Thus, the study observes the resilience of the traditional inheritance practices, where the combined factors of clan and lineage as well as gender remains the predominant determinants of property transmission and its entitlement to inherit it. Accordingly, property distribution within Ao community is male centric, with 179 respondents opining that the ancestral property in Ao society is primarily distributed via inheritance through the male offspring, emphasising that inheritance is the primary mode of property distribution.

When it comes to the controller of properties, it was classified into ancestral and acquired properties. In terms of ancestral properties, the husbands (135), fathers (44), sons (20) and brothers (1) were in control. This reveals the patriarchal nature of Ao society, where the male family members hold a dominant position in owning, inheriting, and controlling the ancestral clan properties. The study also highlighted that, in the case of widowed or divorced women, the control of property typically does not go directly to the wife, but to her male children instead, and takes on the role of property controllers, emphasising the traditional customs of lineage-based inheritance system. In terms of acquired property, it was observed that there is prevalence of joint ownership and control with 15 respondents (13 from developed and 2 from underdeveloped) sharing this, and opined that even in cases where land is obtained through personal effort, it is often shared with a male spouse rather than independently owning and controlling it. Only three respondents from developed villages stated that they control their own properties individually. Thus, the study observes that the distribution and control of property within Ao society is deeply rooted in traditional practices, with clan, lineage, and gender being the key factors determining ownership rights. The fathers, husbands, and sons or men in general typically own and control the ancestral properties, and even within acquired properties, it is more common for women to share ownership with their marital partners rather than owning and controlling the properties independently.

Under property rights and gender, the equal distribution of resources; preference for male heirs; societal norms dominating inheritance practices; patriarchal property abuse and the consequences that arise as a result of not adhering to the norms were examined and explored. When it comes to the equality in resource distribution, Deere and Doss (2006) point out that

there is a significant gender gap in land ownership. The study also found that an overwhelming majority 176 respondents opined that resources are not distributed equally among men and women in Ao society, reinforcing the deeply rooted patriarchal framework that governs the inheritance practices as stated by (Kaushik, 2007). Moreover, the respondents also opined that even among men, the eldest gets the first choice and the privilege (Maine, 1861), or that some clans have more land while others have less. Notably, nine respondents opined that resources are distributed equally in the society, with slightly more responses from underdeveloped villages (7) compared to developed ones (2). This shows that, although rare, some individuals believe that the community engage in equitable practices. However, such cases remain minimal, making them exceptions rather than indicative of the broader societal practice and perception.

A universal preference for male inheritance has also been observed in the study supporting the work of (Bhalotra et al., 2020) with all 200 respondents (100%) from both developed and undeveloped villages agreeing on this practice, which emphasising the deep-rooted patriarchal norms and its influence on the perception and practice of inheritance in Ao society. Thus, the study also emphasised on examining whether men and societal norms dominated women in the inheritance practice, and it was observed that the majority of 160 respondents (80%) feel that societal norms and male dominance shape the inheritance practices in Ao society. Respondent 118 from an underdeveloped village noted that:

“For us, inheritance has never been an issue. Since descent and property follow male lines, there has been no need to discuss women inheriting land. It is not discrimination but an accepted practice.”

This clearly paints a picture of the rigid and exclusionary inheritance system in Ao Naga society, where male inheritance is a deeply institutionalized practice reinforced by societal beliefs, cultural narratives, and historical relevance, with women themselves perpetuating and continuing the practice.

In contrast to Griffiths (2002) who writes that men misuse their control over family property, the majority of the respondents from the study believed that there is no such misuse or abuse of property. Only 15 respondents, five from developed and ten from underdeveloped villages opined that men abuse the property. Respondent 132 from an underdeveloped village stated:

“In our village, men alone control the property absolutely. While we don’t always call it abuse, the reality is that it is their right alone.”

This quote encapsulated the perception of patriarchal property control, reflecting how exclusion is seen as normal rather than as an issue of fairness. However, the low acknowledgment of abuse does not necessarily indicate an absence of abuse but rather a societal reluctance to recognize it as problematic, due to the acceptance of inheritance practices as customary, rather than abusive. This can be seen in the instance where the considerable majority of 154 respondents, opined that they have not encountered patriarchal property abuse. The widespread rejection of patriarchal property abuse reinforces the idea that traditional property inheritance and male-dominated land ownership and its practice is normalized rather than seen as exploitative.

When it comes to the negative sanctions, a notable 180 respondents (90%) affirmed that deviating from societal norms results in negative repercussions or sanctions. This reinforces the strong cultural emphasis on adherence to traditional practices and highlights the acceptance and conformation to norms even though it is discriminatory in nature, which is deeply rooted within the fabric of the Ao society. The rigidity of social norms and the community's strong disapproval for deviation, particularly in contexts related to gender roles, inheritance practices, and the advocacy of rights, thus results in sanctions being imposed.

An attempt was also made to understand the conflicts that arise over property rights. However, it was observed that only one respondent from a developed village experienced conflicts over property rights. A 50-year-old woman from a family with no male siblings experienced 'Intestate succession dispute of parents Acquired Property,' and highlighted how gender and marital status along with the customary norms becomes an obstacle for a women's right to inherit, even in the case of acquired property.

In terms of siblings' disputes over inheritance, the majority 170 respondents (85%), rather felt that such conflicts do not occur between siblings, indicating that traditional inheritance customs, which prioritize male succession, are widely accepted. However, 20 respondents, 13 from developed and seven from underdeveloped villages, opined that disputes do occur when there is unequal or unfair distribution of acquired properties of the parents. Emphasis was also laid on examining whether problems arise in family due to lack of property, and 184 respondents reported that they do not face any such issues within their families, with similar feedback from respondents of both developed and underdeveloped villages. Respondent 59 from a developed village mentioned:

“This is how things have always been for us. Men inherit and own the land, and women are taken care of by men. I don’t think it causes any problems in the family. Economic problems, lack of respect or security whatever it maybe it cannot be solved just by owning a piece of land.”

On the matter of escalation of violence when women demand for equal rights to ancestral property, 130 respondents (65%), felt that violence would indeed escalates when women challenge societal norms supporting the work of (Izuhara and Koppe, 2019). This indicates that patriarchal dominance is deeply rooted in Ao society that confronting these systems would encounter strict resistance. Moreover, a more significant 167 respondents (83.5%) believed that advocating for equal rights for women tends to escalate family conflicts. Women asserting their rights is frequently viewed as a challenge to the established patriarchal authority and that they face more resistance from within the family itself rather than the society in general. Ao women thereby face a direct threat of violence when they advocate or stand for equal rights to ancestral clan properties, highlighting the hostile social environment that leaves no space to go against the customary practices in Ao society. Property disputes have also far-reaching consequences, leading to social exclusion, emotional turmoil, and in some cases, violence and societal backlash. The study thereby highlights that inheritance disputes involve complex emotional, social, and cultural beliefs, and the deep entanglement of property with power, identity and local governance. This makes it difficult to implement legal reforms without engaging with the traditional institutions, which is also safeguarded and protected under Article 371 A of Indian Constitution.

Decision making and empowerment as a result of owning property was also examined. However, only 6 respondents from developed villages were found to have independent authority over the acquired properties they own. While 9 respondents had joint control over the properties with their spouse, demonstrating instances of personal financial autonomy and capability leading to legal ownership legal and control over property. Their involvement primarily centred around selling, purchasing, and mortgaging of property they acquired. While these actions are somewhat limited, they illustrate the specific circumstances in which women assert decision-making authority, frequently restricted by patriarchal structures that favour male dominance in property management. The remaining 185 (92.5%) did not have any decision-making authority over landed property since they do not own any property.

On the perspective of decision making in household due to land ownership, 52 respondents, 28 from developed and 24 from underdeveloped villages felt that owning land would give women a greater say in household decision making as said by (Giovarelli, 2006 and Basnet, 2012). These women associate land ownership with status, greater autonomy and respect within the family, and thereby enable them to actively engage in household governance. But a considerable proportion of 80 respondents (40%), does not associate land ownership with authority in household decision-making, highlighting that merely possessing land is not enough to alter the traditional family structures, particularly in a patriarchal society.

When it came to the capability of handling property like men, the majority of 139 respondents (69.5%), felt that women can manage property just as effectively as men. This comprised of 89 respondents from developed villages and 50 from underdeveloped villages, who emphasized that management skills can be learned over time and are not inherently linked to gender, and if given the opportunity, women would handle responsibilities effectively as men. However, despite the strong consensus on women's capability, a small minority of 19 respondents (9.5%), 4 from developed and 15 from underdeveloped villages, expressed doubts and believed that women are incapable of managing property in the same way as men. This indicates the internalized gender biases and acceptance of marginalisation in property ownership, its rights and management.

On the significance of land ownership, 74 respondents stressed that it would enhance the welfare and wellbeing of their family; while 18 respondents opined that they would less likely experience economic vulnerability (Kola, 2018). 15 respondents believed that it would lead to more decision making and political clout (Shrestha, 2009) and 5 respondents agreed that it would give them more bargaining power and ability (Mookerjee, 2015; Gupta, 2022). At the same time 54 respondents argued that it would lead to more decision-making power which would result in increased economic well and family welfare (Mishra and Sam, 2016). The remaining 34 respondents believed that it would result in all the aspects mentioned above.

The study also explored whether owning land would act as domestic violence deterrent and observed that the majority of 152 respondents (76%) believe that land ownership offers some level of protection from domestic violence as seen in (Bhatla, Chakraborty and Duvvury, 2006). This indicated that women with property ownership is less vulnerable to abuse, as ownership provides financial autonomy, exit options in abusive relationships, and bargaining power in household dynamics supporting the work of (Kola, 2018). In addition to deterring domestic

violence, the respondents of the study also believed that property ownership would empower women more broadly by providing economic self-sufficiency, upward mobility, and heightened self-esteem. 165 respondents (82.5%), 81 from developed and 84 from underdeveloped villages, moreover, expressed that owning property would ensure financial stability and provide generational security in the long run, show by (Duflo 2003; Nagarajan et al., 2010); and Kumar and Quisumbing, 2013).

On the transformative impacts of property ownership on women's lives who owned property, the 21 respondents who owned property acknowledged that it contributed to their empowerment. This indicates that only a small minority of Ao Naga women from the study experienced empowerment as a result of owning property. The empowerment that came as a result of them owning property included: improved living standard in family and society; greater decision-making role and economic development.

The present study therefore stresses on the transformative potential of property ownership, coupled with its impact on women's empowerment. For Ao Naga women, owning property is just more than a financial asset; it serves as key factor in their empowerment, respect and a stronger voice. While societal norms often limit women's right to inherit and own property those who do own land find themselves feeling secure, stable, and self-sufficient, emphasizing the importance of property ownership in improving the lives of women in Ao society.

Chapter VI: Barriers to women's access to property

The barriers that hinder Ao Naga women's access to property and their ability to inherit it, was carried out and presented in Chapter VI. The limited access to inheritance and property rights of women in Ao society is a reflection of the culmination of the traditional practice, customary law, political structure, land use systems, clan structure, kinship practices and identity related to land. Despite some women owning property acquired through purchase or via parents will, they remain excluded from the ancestral clan properties, creating disparities in property ownership with only men having the rights to own and inherit it. As such, this Chapter identified the factors that act as barriers and impede women's access to property ownership and inheritance in Ao society and at the same time, evaluated the societal efforts towards women's standing on property inheritance under five thematic headings.

When it came to the experiences of discrimination, the study found out that only one respondent from a developed village was deprived of her right to property. A closer look at this case (Respondent 6) revealed that the discrimination was about her claim to her parents' acquired

property, not ancestral property. This distinction revealed an important feature in the inheritance system of the Ao Nagas, where the traditional practice excludes women from inheriting ancestral properties, they give equal rights to the parents' acquired properties. Consequently, the study highlighted that discrimination occurred solely in the context of acquired property. In contrast, the exclusion of women from ancestral properties is not perceived by women themselves as unjust, discriminatory or exclusionary.

In terms of the instances of respondent's acquaintances suffering such deprivation, it was seen that 11 respondents were aware of their acquaintances who were denied the rights to acquired property, with respondents from developed villages (7) more vocal than their underdeveloped counterparts (4). Thus, in this study, although only one respondent from a developed village faced the issue of being denied the right to property, the respondents themselves have female acquaintances who were deprived of acquired property rights, and while the issue is not widespread or common, it is a prevalent reality in Ao society.

The study also focused on examining the gender bias (Grown et al., 2005) in property rights and explored whether the respondents were barred from rights to land because they were women. It found that a significant 146 respondents (73%), felt that they were denied the rights to property simply because they are women. While the remaining respondents argued that the rights in the inheritance practice of Ao society does not depend on their gender alone. Although it certainly plays a role, there are other factors which contribute to women's lack of access to property and inheritance rights. As such, the effects of gender on property ownership were also examined and 146 respondents stated that women do not enjoy equality in land and property rights and 12 respondents opined that women own less than men solely or jointly. 17 respondents further stated that women have fewer rights than men and 25 respondents stated that even when women do own land the plots are smaller as compared to men. Thus, along with the intricate cultural beliefs and traditional practices, gender does play a significant role in the inheritance practice of Ao society with biased preference for men.

The accessibility issues faced by women in Ao society ranged in terms of socio-cultural, legal and psychological barriers. The socio-cultural practices dictate that women are not entitled to own property because of the symbolic identity attached to land, the patrilocal residence system and the political system as well. The prevalence of these socio-cultural traditions becomes a persistent barrier to Ao women's land ownership restricting their ability to inherit, own, or control property despite legal provisions for gender equality as said by (Rao, 2011). Moreover,

while socio-cultural norms dictate exclusionary practices and expectations, patriarchy sustains it by legitimising and reinforcing it (Rawal and Agrawal, 2016). The different roles, rights and privileges for both men and women is set by patriarchy, shaping the family dynamics and the power structure in Ao society. Plus, over the course of time, this arrangement has become normalise and have stayed unchallenged.

The legal structure and governance system of Ao society further exacerbates the situation. The respondents of the study acknowledged that customary law (Nongbri, 1998; Fernandes and Bharali, 2009) is another primary barrier to women's property rights in Ao society, with 133 respondents terming it as men centric. It functions as a cultural and legal authority, upholding the patriarchal structure and determining the rights and privilege of man and women in Ao society, which further sustains its dominance. Furthermore, despite the prevalence of formal legal frameworks guaranteed through the Indian Constitution, customary laws have stayed unchallenged and this dual legal system creates a conflict between the two instead.

The structural exclusion of women is further reflected in the governance system of the Ao Nagas. The study observed that there are limited power and involvement in decision-making process and the opinions of the women are not considered or disregarded as well. Plus, governance and leadership roles in the society are reserved for men alone. As such, in Ao society the important leadership positions are taken by men or reserved for men and this reinforces the secondary position of women in the society. Their roles are delegated to household affairs and the governance and decision-making aspects stay with the men.

Ao women's exclusion in inheritance practices is further compounded by legal and knowledge barriers. Awareness of legal rights play a vital role but only 66 respondents were aware of their legal rights. In contrast, the remaining respondents had no idea about the legal rights and were not aware whether other legal aspects were prevalent for women or not. It was also seen that not many have not given any thoughts on it at all as such legal rights and practices are not a part of everyday conversation in their lives. This general lack of legal knowledge also shown by (Verma and Narwal, 2024) among the respondents highlights a critical gap between legal provisions and social reality, further compounding and affecting the awareness on writing wills. Only 26 respondents were aware or understood the concept of writing a will, which would give their daughters or anyone in their will to inherit their acquired properties. Moreover, the majority of the respondents were not aware of the any campaigns or awareness programs on legal rights that were organised by Women Organisations.

Besides the socio-cultural and legal barriers that are often visibly recognised as barriers to women's rights to property, psychological barriers represented a subtle yet significant obstacle. The most common psychological barrier was fear as seen in (Rekha & Yaseen, 2012). Ao women do not claim and assert their share of property because of the fear of social consequences, family conflicts, or the risk of cultural condemnation and exclusion. Patriarchy again further exacerbated this situation keeping women from questioning and challenging the traditional inheritance practices. However, fear and normalisation of the traditional inheritance practice have become indistinguishable, since Ao women do not see the denial of property as a violation but rather as something that is culturally appropriate. Because of this, changes in law or constitutional guarantee alone cannot change the inheritance practice that is internalised so deeply, without also addressing the social, psychological, and cultural mechanisms that uphold and perpetuate the discriminatory norms.

Women also face more challenges in exercising their rights and there is also increased vulnerability due to lack of property. However, it was also observed that while property ownership does provide some level of empowerment and improves the status of women in the society, it does not guarantee full security. Rather, the emphasis was laid on education, employment and self-sufficiency as a subsequent result of it supporting the work of (Toktas and O'neil, 2013). Additionally, it was also seen that the majority of the respondents in the study (124 respondents) as well as Ao women in general did not consider women's demand for a share in ancestral property as legitimate. The opposition stems from the fact that women themselves view the inheritance of properties as naturally male domain and property ownership might empower women in different ways but the internalisation of the cultural practice creates a perception that going against the accepted practice would make one seem rebellious or even selfish. As such Ao women themselves are protective of the cultural practice and does not recognise the legitimacy of women asking for a share in ancestral property.

When it comes to the inheritance reform, the respondent's perception on whether property inheritance rights are necessary for women was examined and explored. Only 86 respondents believed that property inheritance rights are necessary for women, stating that property can provide sustenance and status, bargaining abilities, determine economic independence and become essential when one is unemployed or when there are lesser opportunities. Meanwhile, 92 respondents rejected the notion that property inheritance rights are necessary women, highlighting that making any shift towards equitable inheritance rights is seen as unnecessary and disruptive to the cultural practice. Any move towards challenging or standing against the

norm is seen as a threat to the cultural identity where gendered exclusion is not perceived as injustice but rather as a traditional practice.

The study further explored whether respondents believed that there is a need to bring changes in the property inheritance system or not and found out that the majority 155 respondents expressed opposition to inheritance reform, reflecting a strong commitment to traditional norms. It is indicative of the fact that Ao women have internalised the patriarchal values and is apprehensive about the potential social or familial backlash if they attempt to challenge or go against the inheritance system. Only 17 respondents were seen to express support for reforming the inheritance practices, pointing that Ao women do not really stress on the need for reform and enhanced equality for women.

Women in Ao society thus face numerous barriers starting from socio-cultural practices to legal and local governance structures as well as psychological barriers. Women's gender also plays a significant role, with the symbolic identity attached to land, coupled with patrilineal practices and male dominated political system that maintain and create an exclusionary inheritance system. Moreover, even though the inheritance practice is discriminatory in nature, Ao women themselves uphold and perpetuate the system as they have been socialised and internalised to believe and accept the inheritance practices as the norm. Thus, Ao women themselves believe that property inheritance rights are not necessary for women nor do they believe that there is a need for change or reform in the inheritance practice of Ao society.

In terms of the role of government and civil society organisations, the study found that there is a need to translate laws into the local language to enhance the awareness of both women and men in general in Ao society to keep one aware of their rights and make a more informed decision-making in matters that would benefit them. It was also seen that there is a collective desire of Ao women to understand the legal laws and effectively navigate their rights where ever applicable. All this would be possible through the initiatives by the government and civil societies to bridge the gap between formal and customary laws.

It was also evident that even though awareness initiatives are vital, government and civil society organisations must also confront the deeply rooted societal and cultural practices and the study found that a significant 77 respondents believed that there is reluctance among different organisations and parties to engage with the issues of women's property rights. Although while some believe that there is no reluctance as such especially on acquired properties, the reluctance to engage with ancestral properties reflects the broader hesitation of

the parties involved to challenge the customary practices that have been handed down, accepted and followed as the norm.

In terms of the initiatives taken, the church, the Watsu Mungdang and different civil societies using different mediums and strategies have been actively involved in creating awareness through different means and advocating for women's property rights. However, despite all the initiatives and awareness efforts, a common sentiment seen among the respondents of the study was that, customary and cultural practices deter the impact of such initiatives on ancestral properties and even at times with acquired properties, thereby remaining as a persistent barrier for women's right to inherit property in Ao society.

Nonetheless, the study concludes that the exclusion of women from property rights in Ao society will continue to exist as an unquestionable norm rather than being contested and deviation from the accepted norm would encounter stigmatisation and even ostracisation. The only possible outcome and realistic progress lie in securing and guaranteeing equal rights for women in acquired properties through proper legal laws and awareness, which can be done through the intervention of government and civil society organisations as well as the stake holders involved in general.

Chapter VII: Summary and Conclusion

This chapter gives a summary of all the chapters in the thesis under 7 headings and discusses the developed and underdeveloped villages in context, the sociological implications of the study as well as the future areas for research. The study employed a comparative research design and as such one of the objectives was to do a comparative analysis of the developed and underdeveloped villages. The differences in perspectives and lived experiences of Ao women were presented largely qualitatively while analysing the findings. The following table summarises the differences between the developed and underdeveloped villages in terms of some selected quality parameters.

Table 7.1. Comparing Developed and Underdeveloped Villages

Sl. No	Parameters	Developed Village	Underdeveloped Village	Key Insights
1	Property Ownership Status	17 respondents own acquired property; None holds ancestral land. Separate space for self-acquired against inheritance.	4 respondents own acquired property; None hold ancestral land. Separate space for self-acquired against inheritance.	Ownership higher in developed villages due to access to resources; Extended 'security and independence.'

2	Source of Self-acquired Property	Purchase (13) Wills (3) Permitted (1)	Purchase (2) Permitted (2)	Economic agency higher in developed villages; Underdeveloped rely on kin, spouse or permission.
3	Control of Acquired Property	Joint ownership (13), Self-ownership (3) Permission based (1)	Joint ownership (2) Permission based (2)	Empowerment insignificant. Joint control and patriarchal decision-making looms large.
4	Basis of lack of entitlement to Ancestral property	Clan and Lineage (82) Gender (18)	Clan and Lineage (76) Gender (24)	Collective ownership of clan land; Do not bother about entitlement nor related claims.
5	Conflict over Property Rights	Land dispute involvement (1); Fear of violence and family division; Some women challenge norms.	Land dispute involvement (0); Family problems due to lack of property; Few challenge norms.	Barest minimum dispute over acquired properties; Conflict over rights to ancestral Property was none.
6	Experiences of Discrimination	Only 1 woman reported direct discrimination (acquired property, not ancestral); More aware of acquaintances facing issues (7)	None personally experienced deprivation; Less aware of acquaintance with issues (4)	Discrimination is rarest of the rare and an unclaimed fact and a non-issue.
7	Gender bias in property rights and Psychological Barriers	Barred from rights because of Gender (70); Awareness linked to patriarchy, education and comparison with wider world. Fear of going against norms (71); Fear of sanctions, guilt, stigma, clan backlash and relational issues.	Barred from rights because of Gender (76); Stressed on different privileges and internalisation of norms. Fear of going against norms (62), rooted in internalised norms; However, more indecisive on the issue.	High recognition across both groups that gender bars women from land rights; Minority believe gender alone isn't the sole reason. Fear of tradition is universal; both in developed and underdeveloped villages due to Internalization and Socialization.
8	Socio-Cultural & Legal Barriers	Higher emphasis on interplay of all socio-cultural barriers like patriarchy, clan dynamics, gender and spatial structure. Greater exposure to legal concepts like wills and awareness campaigns. But of no use due to predominance of	Stronger acceptance of gender norms as cultural fact. Unquestionable acceptance of customary law as natural, overwhelmingly unaware of legal rights, wills, and awareness campaigns.	Developed villages show deeper cultural understanding and awareness. But in practice there was minimal difference between them in unequivocal acceptance of patriarchy. Significant legal awareness gap; Unquestionable

		patriarchal customary law		acceptance of customary law in both.
9	Challenges & Vulnerability	Accept inevitability of challenges faced; vulnerability linked not to property but to education and employment	Similar strong agreement on such vulnerabilities; Majority rather linked vulnerability to lack of opportunities.	The link between property ownership and security is widely recognized; but education, employment and access to resources are seen as better empowerment routes.
10	Role of Civil Society	More exposure to awareness; But were reluctant to address women's property issues.	Less exposure to awareness campaigns; Resilience and property issues were non-issue	Awareness and exposure better in developed villages; CS intervention is just cosmetic in both. Unbothered about culturally sensitive reform and more awareness.

The comparative analysis of the developed and underdeveloped villages indicates that Ao women irrespective of the socio-economic status or habitat, do not have the right to inherit or own ancestral property. However, access to and experiences of empowerment, decision-making, control and awareness of rights among Ao women differ when it comes to self-acquired properties. Such cases are very few in number.

Women in developed villages were notably seen to have higher level of acquired property ownership through purchase. But, women in underdeveloped villages have lesser acquired properties and depended more on permission or usufructuary rights to land granted by relatives or spouses. This shows how economic capacity directly influences the possibility of women's ownership and autonomy over acquired properties. Moreover, in developed villages the acquired properties were also jointly owned and decision-making were shared between the spouses. In contrast, women in underdeveloped villages exhibited lesser independent decision-making, and more dependence on male members. However, despite the prevalence of joint ownership, decision-making was largely patriarchal.

The lack of ancestral property ownership or rights in Ao society is attributed to clan, lineage, political structure, clan dynamics and gender. Women in developed villages were more aware of how those social norms were influenced by patriarchy and the societal structure of Ao society, while women in underdeveloped villages regarded it as inherent to their gender. Conflict over property rights also differed between developed and underdeveloped villages. Women in developed villages reported occasional disputes over acquired properties. However,

there were no such reports of conflicts with ancestral properties. This absence, however, came with greater economic vulnerability.

In terms of legal awareness there were also significant disparities. Women in developed villages owing to increased exposure to awareness programmes, possessed enhanced knowledge and understanding of customary law, wills, and legal rights, while women in underdeveloped villages showed limited legal awareness and greater acceptance of customary law as natural and accepted norm. Psychological barriers, including fear of sanctions, guilt, backlash, or social exclusion is prominent among women in Ao society. Women in developed villages often perceive these fears as socially constructed, while women in underdeveloped villages exhibit internalised acceptance, resulting in silence, indecisiveness, and reluctance to challenge the societal norms.

Women in both developed and underdeveloped villages acknowledge that they encounter greater challenges as compares to men in terms of ownership and property rights. Women in developed villages prioritised education and employment as better means of empowerment, while women in underdeveloped villages considered property ownership as fundamental to alleviating their vulnerability. Perspectives on the roles of civil society and organisations also differed significantly, with women in developed villages indicating a reluctance to confront women's property rights directly by such organisations, whereas, women in underdeveloped villages remain largely unaware and indecisive.

Overall, although customary norms and practices are uniform throughout Ao Naga society, various factors such as the economic mobility, education, and awareness have empowered women in developed villages to critically examine the tradition norms and assert their limited rights while still adhering to it and women in underdeveloped villages showed deeper internalisation of the restrictive norms without critically examining why and accepted it as the norm.

Sociological implications of the study

The overall picture of the study highlights that there is a complex interplay of socio-cultural, traditions, patriarchal norms, customary laws, kinship and marriage structures, clan dynamics and identity, political system and gender norms, all interact and come together to form the inheritance system of Ao society where women are denied the right to own or inherit ancestral property. Besides the findings of the study aside, it is essential to examine and theoretically contextualise why the practice is the way it is and understand its context sociologically. To do

that 6 theories have been employed: Gender Theory of Inheritance, Kinship theories of Descent and Alliance, Symbolic Interactionism, Social Exchange Theory, Conflict Perspective, and the Human Rights Approach. By using these theories, the study tries to get an understanding of the inheritance practise of Ao Naga society.

Table 7.2 Integrated Theoretical Perspectives and its context for the study

Theory	Theorist	Postulates	Study Context
Gender Theory	Agarwal (1994), Hacker (2010), Rao, (2011), Zhllima, Edwin. et al, (2021).	1). Women's gender affects her rights. 2). Patriarchal tradition limits women's inheritance rights. 3). Socio-cultural norms and perceptions reinforce gender biases. 4). Traditional informal norms classify women as second-class citizens.	Among the Aos, this scenario is visible in the cultural imperative that men are landowners while women are excluded from ownership rights or inheritance.
Kinship theory: Descent and Alliance	Evans-Pritchard, (1940), Fortes (1953), Maine (1861), Morgan (1877), Brown & Sawayan (1977). Levis Strauss (1949).	1). Principal lines of descent are patrilineal. 2). Patriarchy as earliest form of Kinship. 3). Settled agriculture resulted in control over women and monogamy so that properties could pass on to his children. 4). Clan based ownership of property are symbolic. 5). Significance of property as a symbol of the family. 6). Interactions and connections built through marriage and the exchange of women between groups.	Property remains within the male line because of patriarchy, institutionalisation of gender roles and symbolic clan-based ownership. Marriage alliances also reinforce women's exclusion by transferring them to other clans, limiting their claims to ancestral property.
Symbolic Interactionism	Mead (1934), Kuhn (1964), Blumer (1969),	1). Social construction of meanings. 2). Internalisation of societal roles and expectations. 3). Meanings and social interaction	Symbolic meanings attached to land as communal identity and clan ownership, make women's exclusion appear to be natural or even necessary and Ao women have internalised the norm.
Social Exchange	Chavanness (1901), Kelley (1959) and Scanzoni (1970), Homans (1961), Blau (1964), Edward (1969) Osmond and Thorne (1993)	1). Exchange as the foundation of all human relationships. 2). Human relationship based on benefits and cost associated exchange. 3). Interaction in terms of exchange. 4). Solidarity developed when marital exchanges are fair. 5). Interaction among humans within a social structure is goal oriented rather than random.	Marriage practices are justified in terms of exchange or marriage within different clans. The exchange/marriage between different clans normalise the unfair denial of rights to women protect it.

Conflict Perspective	Engles (1884), Simmel (1956) Coser (1956), Dahrendorf (1959), Homans (1961), Lenski (1966), Engles (1970).	1). Social groups deprived of material resources fighting to remedying the injustice. 2). Property is considered as a scarce resource by men and women fighting for equal inheritance results in conflict. 3). Significant power differentiation of men and women. 4). Superimposition. 5). Distributive Justice. 6). As long as scarcity exists conflict arises over the distribution of resources. 7). Men instituted monogamy to ensure that they could pass on his property to male child.	Disputes arise when women fight for equal inheritance. Going against the practice is also seen as a challenge to patriarchy and is resisted because it is perceived as disrupting the social order, threat to male privilege and clan autonomy and identity.
Human Rights Based Approach	UN General Assembly (1948) Hellebrunn (2001) Koskinen (2005). Ikdahl, and Hellebrunn et al., (2005) Nowak (2005)	1). Principle of non-discrimination based on sex. 2). Non-discriminatory right to livelihood. 3). Assist women in identification of rights and foster their right to assert claims on property. 4). Human agencies, capabilities and entitlement as key factors in equality and development. 5). Entitlements to rights with legal obligations to respect, protect, and fulfil rights.	Provides interventive framework and ethical grounding for the study and asserts what ought to be. It also suggests the policy recommendations for justice and equality. Yet despite the legal provisions, Customary law becomes a hindrance and Ao women also deem the inheritance rights as non-necessary.

The different theoretical perspectives integrated offers a comprehensive understanding of the intricacies related to Ao women's property inheritance rights. It draws attention to the enduring impact of the patriarchal customs, the gendered norms, the significance of kinship, marriage alliance and descent in the transfer of property, the meaning attached to property, inevitability of conflict over scarce resources and unfair distribution and the critical need for a human rights-based strategy to guarantee gender equality in terms of inheritance practices. These theoretical perspectives highlight the fact that the inheritance practice of Ao society is deeply embedded and rooted in the cultural practice and traditions of the society, whereby it is socially constructed with significant implications to cultural identity. Tradition maintains its stronghold and individuals have been socialised in the practice that even the women themselves knowingly and consciously adhere to the inheritance norm and collectively choose to uphold the prevailing practice due to their socialisation and continue to appreciate the resilience instead of change.

Moreover, while the different theoretical perspectives offer valuable insights, none alone can adequately explain the complexity of women's property inheritance in Ao Naga society. Each

theory sheds light on one dimension of the issue, but when connected together in sequence, they reveal a cyclical process that explains both the prevalence and the persistence of gender inequality in the property inheritance rights. As such a 4-layer cyclical model have been developed integrating all the theories to explain the cycle of discrimination in the inheritance practice.

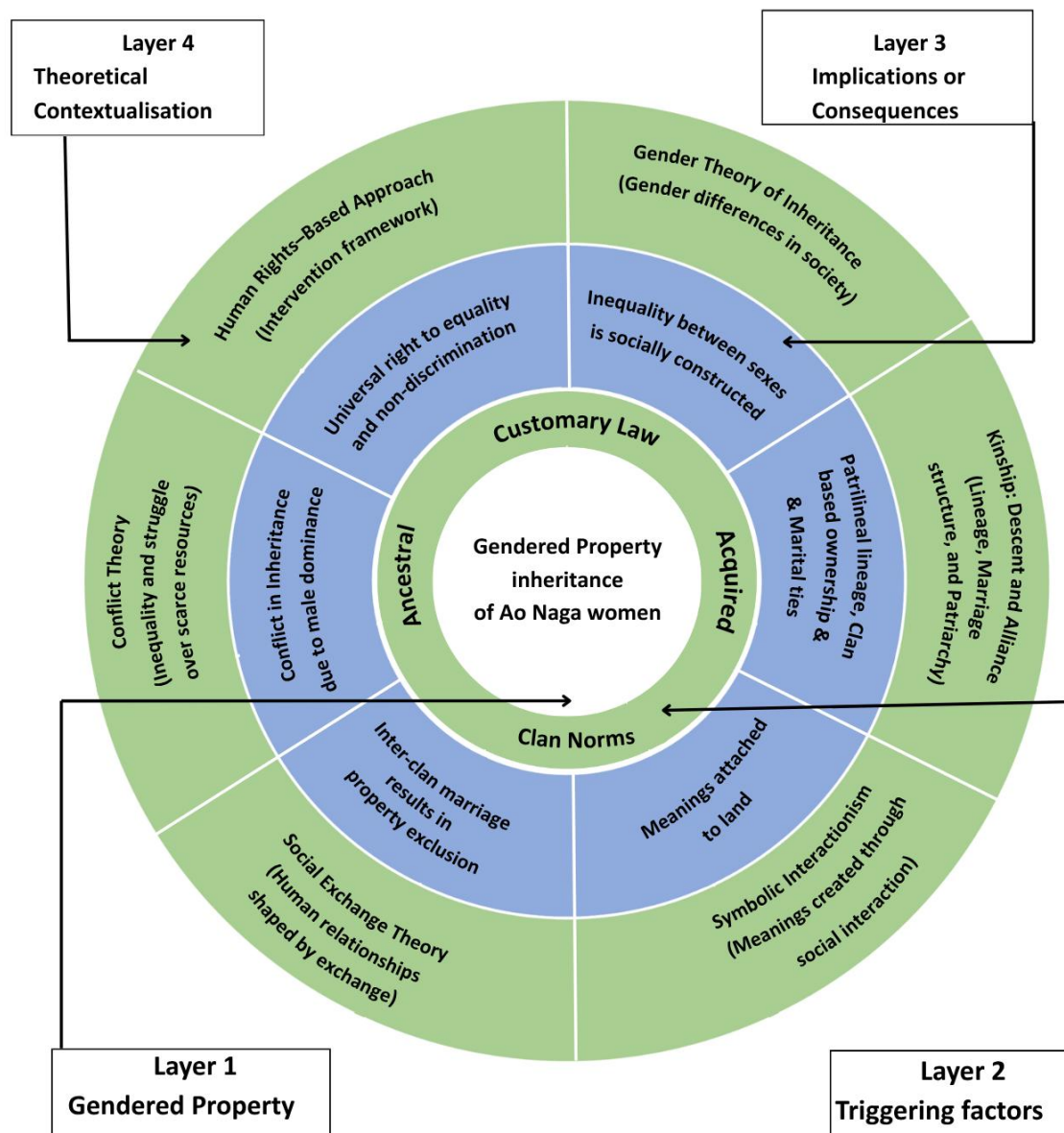


Fig 7.1. Ao Women's Integrated Inheritance Cycle Model (AWIICM)

This model comprises of four interconnected layers:

1. Gendered Property Inheritance of Ao Naga Women
2. Factors of Gendered Property Inheritance

3. Implications of the Gendered Property Inheritance

4. Theoretical Contextualisation of the implications.

The first layer (gendered property inheritance) highlights the gendered nature of property inheritance among Ao Naga women, who are traditionally restricted from inheriting ancestral property. The second layer (triggering factors) explicates the very factors which together tend to trigger such gendered discrimination. These factors included: a). customary law b). clan norms c). ancestral property and d). acquired property. The third layer (implications or consequences) explores the implications of this gendered inheritance system, examining the underlying causes and consequences of women's exclusion from property rights. Finally, the fourth layer (Contextualisation of theories) offers a theoretical contextualisation of these implications in an integrated framework, that leads to the gendered property inheritance of Ao Naga women.

Thus, by implication 2nd layer provides the causal dimension of Layer 1. Layer 3 indicates the very consequential implications of Layer 1 and 2. Layer 4 puts the relevant theories to context relating to Layer 3, 2 and 1 in an integrated pluralistic theoretical framework.

To understand the cyclical nature, the Gender Theory of Inheritance establishes that every society is characterized by gender differences in accessing the rights, resources, and opportunities. Patriarchal traditions, socio-cultural norms and perceptions reinforce the gender bias and classifies women as second-class citizens. In the context of the Aos, this biasness is visible in the cultural expectations that men are landowners while women are excluded from owning or inheriting it. The Kinship theories of Descent and Alliance elaborates that the gendered roles are institutionalized through the principal line of descent which is patrilineal in tribal societies. These patrilineal kinship structure dictate that property should remain within the male line because the clan-based ownership of property is symbolic, and marriage alliances reinforce women's exclusion by transferring them to other clans and limiting their claims to ancestral property.

The gender disparities and practices gain legitimacy through the lens of Symbolic Interactionism and Social Exchange Theory. On the one hand, marriage practices are justified in terms of exchange or marriage within different clans. On the other hand, symbolic meanings attached to land as ancestral identity and clan ownership, make women's exclusion appear to be natural or even necessary. These symbolic and exchange-based meanings normalize the unfair denial of property rights to women in Ao society and this structural arrangement leads

to conflict, which the Conflict perspective helps to explain. Since land is considered as a scarce resource that belongs to the men and clan, disputes naturally arise when women go against that practice and fight for equal ownership and its inheritance. This is seen as a challenge to patriarchy and women's claim to property is resisted because granting them the rights is perceived as disrupting the social order and threatening the male privilege and clan autonomy. The result of this cyclical process is the Outcome: the systematic denial of property ownership by women and its inheritance in Ao society.

This gender disparity and discriminatory practice can be theoretically be addressed through the Human Rights Based Approach. Different international frameworks such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), CEDAW - the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979), the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995), the Sustainable Development Goals (2015), the principle of non-discrimination and the right to equality under the Indian Constitution all offers various policies and reforms for a corrective intervention to equality. Such frameworks advocate for the recognition of women's right to property as a fundamental entitlement. Yet, in practice, these policies and reforms remain largely ineffective in the case of the Ao Nagas where there is prevalence of Customary laws over formal laws.

Moreover, despite the discriminatory nature of the inheritance practice and various platforms for reforms, the findings of the study highlights that Ao women in general, including the educated, employed and well to do self-reliant women elites, were opposed to change and does not stand for the inheritance rights, nor asks for a share in ancestral property. The internalisation of the cultural practices and collective consciousness of the traditional norms result in the reluctance of women to claim the inheritance rights, arguing instead that property should remain with men alone. Thus, the cycle continues where women in Ao society themselves continue and perpetuate the discriminatory practice despite the availability and efforts of legal reforms.

In terms of future research in the area of property inheritance rights of Ao and Naga women in general, future researchers can consider and look into the following points in their research endeavours:

1. The current study included only 2 Sub-divisions, 4 Administrative Circles and 4 Ao Villages as well as a total of only 200 respondents in the study. Future studies should consider including all the 4 Sub-divisions, 9 Administrative Circles and the different

villages under them to make the study more inclusive and derive a stronger conclusion and findings.

2. The Universe of the study have been classified through the 4 Sub-divisions. However, future researchers can also classify it according to the 6 Ranges of Mokokchung District and identify the villages for the study to select the respondents.
3. In future studies, focus should also be laid on examining the perspectives of both men and women on an equal footing and compare their perspectives on the inheritance issue.
4. A longitudinal and comparative study can further examine whether attitudes towards the inheritance norms are shifting among the younger generations of Ao Naga men and women.
5. The current study highlights that discrimination occurs within ‘Acquired property’ of parents as well. Future researches can also focus on an in-depth study on acquire properties and the dynamics involved with it to have a deeper understanding.
6. The study is also limited to the Ao tribe in general. Researchers can also take up the broader issue of Naga women’s inheritance rights in a study which would include the different Naga tribes and come up with a comparison of the similarities and differences and the main issues in the inheritance rights.
7. Further studies and researches can also examine specific cases of conflict that arises when formal legal laws and customary laws interact or are in conflict with each other with regards to inheritance rights and the laws governing it.

In conclusion, this study on the property inheritance rights of Ao Naga women uncovered a complex interplay of patriarchy, customary laws and internalisation of cultural norms and practices. Ao women themselves consciously uphold the very system that discriminates against them, viewing it as a critical pillar of the cultural identity. This highlights the challenges of balancing tradition in line with the contemporary ideals of gender equality and rights. Further studies and researches should therefore continue to unravel and understand the deeply woven threads of tradition, gender and power in Naga and Ao society in general, in tandem with respecting and understanding the cultural identity.

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