

# **Women as Entrepreneurs: A study of Ima Market in Manipur**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Historically, women have always been subjugated in the society. Women's potential to go out and earn a living has been undermined in the patriarchal social system, making them dependent on the male members of the society. Home is considered to be the place where women belong to and keep them secluded, performing the household chores and childcare responsibilities. The role of women in the production and the overall economy of the society have gone unrecognised. Women's role in economic development of a society or a country has never been documented in the larger developmental and economic literatures. Patriarchal social structures have always defined man as the breadwinner and women as the caregiver. With the publication of the book "Women's role in Economic development" (1970) by Ester Boserup<sup>1</sup> marked a significant step in recognising and documenting the role of women in the developmental literatures. The work she had done on the women's participation in informal economic activities in African societies represented a comprehensive effort to analyse women's role in economic development. In the development literatures, the role of women has been largely ignored, however, Boserup pointed out varieties of issues that are related to the role of women in the economy. She tried to bring out the issues like how the developmental process affects the role of women in the society and its economy. She also argues that women's participation in the economic activities varies regionally and the third world countries are visibly higher, especially in the informal sectors due to various reasons. In her pioneering work, Boserup(1970) pointed out that women usually do more than half the work in the agricultural production and also play an important role in trade. Despite all the criticisms her work had got, this can be regarded as the pioneer work in analysing women's participation in the economic activities theoretically and empirically.

Women's participation in income generating activities or trade is widely present in the African and Asian societies since the early periods. Women of South-East and South Asian countries have always been conspicuously taking part in various production and economic activities and occupy a great role. However, the degree of participation and visibility of women varies across the regions in the continent. This variation is critically examined by

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<sup>1</sup> As cited in the book "Women's Role in economic development" by Ester Boserup(1970).

Haled Afsar and Bina Agarwal<sup>2</sup> (1989) that ideology plays a major role as enabling and disabling factor for women in these regions to earn a living for themselves and their families. They argued,

*“In many parts of Asia (especially in the South and West), for instance, prevailing traditional ideologies impose restrictions on women's participation in income-generating work, by prescribing their confinement within circumscribed spaces, even while their economic situation necessitates such participation.....In contrast, else- where in Asia (as in much of South-East and parts of South Asia), the absence of such restrictions or the prevalence of traditional ideologies that favour female employment and autonomy...can complement women's attempts at economic survival and advancement”* (Afsar&Agarwal: 1989).

This has been proven by the visibility of many women traders and women centric markets in south eastern Asian societies and the visibility of women has been reduced in the parts of south and western Asian societies. In these regions various ideologies such as caste and class play a major role in women’s autonomy which correlated to their participation in earning a living for themselves and for the family and this also varies across the region and within a country which is composed of several ethnic and religious societies co-existing together. For instance, a woman of upper caste and also simultaneously belongs to well off class have the less chances for the autonomy to go out of the home and join the economic activities. On the other hand a woman of a lower class left with no escape. She is compelled to perform her economic responsibilities towards the family and contribute to the family income, sometimes being the sole breadwinner in the family<sup>3</sup>.

In the South Asian region, particularly in Indian sub-continent, caste ideology plays a major role in the society and its functionality which eventually affects the female autonomy and their role in the economic development. Caste identity has always been maintained, especially by the castes which are at the higher rung of the social hierarchy by restricting women of their caste in terms of mobility, marriage and the expression of sexuality. Upper caste women are likely to be more secluded than their counterparts who belong to the lower caste. And autonomy of women and their participation in economic activities other than the

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<sup>2</sup> As discussed in the introductory part of the book “Women, Poverty and Ideology in Asia Contradictory Pressures, Uneasy Resolutions” edited by Haled Afsar and Bina Agarwal (1989).

<sup>3</sup> This has also been discussed by Afsar and Agarwal (1989).

household responsibilities of being caregiver are relatively more conspicuous in tribal societies than that of caste societies. Considering women as an analytical category here, it is important to understand how a particular society has constructed the work-gender relationship and it is necessary to keep in mind

*“...the significance of exploring the broader economic, social, political and cultural contexts of women’s lives”<sup>4</sup> (Dube, Leacock & Ardener; 1987).*

Today, the number of women joining the economic activities to earn a livelihood for themselves or to contribute the economy of the family has been rising, both in formal and informal sectors all over the globe. Women participation in markets is growing as a factor of production, either as a labourer or as an entrepreneur and also as service provider. In India, the rate of participation of women in the income generating activities in the market as traders or entrepreneurs can be differentiated regionally, central, north and north-western states of India witness the least number of women traders and entrepreneurs in the market while the southern states experience relatively more number of women in the market performing trade and businesses seeking to earn a livelihood. More number of women is seen involving in the trade and business activities in the eastern states of India. The north-eastern part of India is seen as a region where more women are involved in income generating activities than women of other parts of the country. Women are engaged in trade and business activities, weaving, making handcrafts items, farming, etc. The existence of many women centric markets in the region have well defined that women in these societies are relatively more free and not restricted in mobility to certain extent as compared to other parts of India. One of the reasons of this is north-eastern region is comprised of many tribal societies where sexual division of labour is different from the ones which exist in caste societies. Women have always been a part of many production processes, be it agriculture, weaving, trading, etc. though they are mostly part of informal economy.

Tiplut Nongbri(2008) pointed out the reason why more women are engaged in the markets that

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<sup>4</sup> As analysed in the book “Visibility and Power: Essays on Women in society and development” ed. By Leela Dube, Eleanor B. Leacock, Shirley Ardener (1987).

*“...trading provides an opportunity for women at a time when education and employment opportunities were limited for the vast majority of the population in the North-East region”<sup>5</sup>. (Nongbri, 2008)*

However, while analysing the contribution of women in an economy, one should also keep in mind of her contribution in the private domain, that is, the household space which remains understated when we talk about women participation in market. A woman in most of the societies, who is participating in the market, always performs the dual role of one in the private domain and the other in the public. However, the question here is whether this growing participation of women in public domain is an index of empowerment of women? Does it help to improve the quality of life of women or does it help reduce the miseries and oppression a woman face in the society? Are women able to assert their identity and express their views and making their own choices in the society, both in private and public domains? Are women still remained as the ‘second’ citizen in decision making in the society despite the economic independence?

It is argued that as the economic development advances, the quality of life for all will also improve eventually. However, as far as the history of economic development in India since independence is concerned the question remains whether the quality of life of an average Indian woman has really improved or not? Is average Indian woman really economically empowered today after many decades of economic development which the early years were focussed mainly on planning and the present period of neo-liberalism? Keeping in mind that woman as an analytical category is not a homogenous group. In Indian context as we mentioned earlier, they are heterogeneous in terms of class, caste, power, property and moreover which ethnic community they belong to. So, when we say “average Indian woman” it simply refers to a standardized life of a woman which can be considered as a reference or focal point of our study. So, we have women who are not marginalized and vulnerable as well as women who are socially and/or economically marginalized and vulnerable.

Keeping all these questions in mind when we study the life of women entrepreneurs and traders who have come out to join the economic responsibilities in the market, we need to understand the terms like entrepreneurship and empowerment (which will be used later in the

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<sup>5</sup> As cited in the book “Gender, Matriliny and Entrepreneurship among the Khasi women “ by Tiplut Nongbri; (2008)



present study) in order to build up an argument on how entrepreneurship taken up by women has led to their empowerment.

*“Empowerment in this work is narrowly defined as a woman's freedom to make choice and decision in her self-interest”.*<sup>6</sup>

And in order to relate this empowerment with entrepreneurship, let us see how various scholars have looked at this term. Etymologically, the term entrepreneur is derived from the French word “entreprendre” which means to undertake.

*“The entrepreneur denotes a person who discharges the entrepreneurial function of coordination, organisation, supervision and risk bearing innovator with unusual will and energy, clarity of vision and an ability to act (Max Weber, 1930), high need for achievement, problem solver, setting goals and reaching these goals by one’s own efforts” (McClelland, 1961; Rao&Mehta, 1978)*<sup>7</sup>.

On the basis of the above definitions given by different authors, it may be stated that the entrepreneur is perceived as an individual who conceives, initiates, establishes, runs and manages an enterprise. An enterprise can vary from starting a small shop to establishing an advanced technology based industry.

However, in this present study we are considering the women traders in the market as entrepreneurs as they (the women under study) run enterprises which are exclusively maintained by themselves and critically look into how their enterprises help them empowered in the society.

As we have mentioned earlier that in India, the north-eastern region has witnessed more number of women traders in the markets and there exist many women centric markets or markets which are exclusively run by the womenfolk of this region. The present study is on one of such markets which are exclusively run and managed by the women in the state of Manipur.

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<sup>6</sup> The most common use of the term “empowerment” refers to increasing the power of the low-power group, so that “it more clearly equals the power of the high power groups” (<http://www.colorado.edu/conflict/peace/treatment/empwer.htm> retrieved on 25/4/2019). The world Bank defines the term empowerment as “the process of increasing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes”.

<sup>7</sup> As quoted in the article “Women entrepreneurship in the north east India: Motivation, Social support and constraints” by Poonam Sinha (*IJR*, Vol. 38, No. 4, April 2003)

## **I.1: Field of the study:**

The *Khwairamband Keithel*, popularly known as the *Ima Keithel* which is literally translated into English as “Mother’s market” is supposed to be the biggest market of its kind in the world which is exclusively run and managed by the women. This market is not just an all women market but also a vibrant commercial hub with more than 7000 women vendors from both the Imphal valley and the hills of the state catering to thousands of customers daily. It is also a critical centre for the deliberations on important socio-political issues of the state. This is one among the many women markets exist in the state of Manipur, however, in terms of the size, this is the largest.

## **I.2: Brief Historical Origin of the Market:**

There is no clear evidence of when this market was started. However, many scholars have agreed that it dates back to the 16th century when there was a tradition called *Lallup Kaaba*<sup>8</sup> which required the adult male members of the Meitei community to serve the King. They would stay away from home for a long period as and when they were called by the king. In the circumstances, it became imperative for the women to shift from the traditional role of housewives performing weaving, cultivation and household chores to outdoor economic activities. This market has survived the onslaught of disruptive forces over the centuries. Since their ascendancy in 1891, the British began to control the trade and commerce of the state thereby undermining the business potential of the women in Manipur. The women withstood against the exploitative policies of the colonial power and launched a revolt which is known as *Nupi Lan* (women’s war) in 1904 and 1939.

In this study we have tried to look into the lives of women in this particular market and how this market has an impact in the social, economic and political aspects of these women’s lives. We also try to connect how this entrepreneurship as traders has led to the empowerment. And what aspects of empowerment has achieved by the women traders in their public and private domains.

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<sup>8</sup> As cited in the article “MARKET IN MEDIEVAL MANIPUR” by W Jyotirmoy Singh, Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, Vol. 76 (2015), pp. 300-304.

### **I.3: Objectives of the study:**

Understanding the relationship between women entrepreneurship and their empowerment and the wider debate of women participation in economic development, the following objectives of the present study on women traders has been framed:

- To analyse how the women entrepreneurs have defined the market space through their lived experiences and the role of the market in the lives of women under study.
- To discuss the emerging social relationships in an economic institution like market and how this impacts the 'rational' economic actions.
- Finally, to examine critically the role of micro-credit/finance organisations and individual investors which provide loans and capitals to these women entrepreneurs

### **I.4: Methodology of the study:**

There is an ever present need for methodological work at all stages of research process. For this study the fieldwork or primary data collection had been conducted through ethnographic mode of study during the period of December 2018 and January 2019 at the Ima Keithel(market). Data were collected by purposive-snowball sampling through in-depth interviews and non-participant observations. As this is a busy market where women traders do their businesses in full energy, approach to them for an in-depth interview was a challenging task and moreover the space or the size of the stalls women use for their trade is as wide as three or four feet, so there are no space for a researcher or anyone other than the trader herself to sit down and have a conversation. The interviews were conducted standing on the sides or front of their stalls with prior permission. The interviews were recorded in a mobile phone and made field notes of the conversation for further analysis.

The whole market is comprised of three market spaces which are housed in pagoda styled concrete structures which are differentiated according to the kind of products which are sold and these three spaces are named differently. The largest being the Ima keithel or the Purana bazaar where all the items which are needed in everyday life are available. And the Laxmi bazaar, a bit smaller, structurally from the above mentioned one is located at the eastern side of the Purana Bazaar and the Linthoingambi market also commonly known as Nupa keithel. While the Laxmi Bazaar deals mostly with handloom products and traditional

costumes, the latter one mostly engages with handicrafts items which are mostly made by men, including knives and other metal products.

The samples or respondents of the study who participated were strategically selected through snowball sampling method to meet the objectives of the study. Pseudonyms have been used in this work to maintain the privacy of the respondents. The interviews were conducted in Manipuri language or commonly known as meiteilon/meeteilon and the narratives have been translated into English for interpretation and analysis. The details of the participants have been presented here under in the form of a table:

**Table.I**

<b>Sl. No.</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Market</b>	<b>Products deal with</b>	<b>No. of years in the market.</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>Mala</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>Purana Bazaar</b>	<b>Betel Nuts and Betel leaves and locally grown tobacco leaves</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Bhabini</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>Purana Bazaar</b>	<b>Fruits</b>	<b>7/8</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Babita</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>Laxmi bazaar</b>	<b>Handloom products especially Phanek-a traditional costumes for Manipuri</b>	<b>9</b>

				<b>Women</b>	
<b>4</b>	<b>Pramodini</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>Purana Bazaar</b>	<b>Flattened rice, traditional sweets. Puffed rice, etc.</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>Medha</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>Linthoingambi market</b>	<b>Handloom products, textiles and locally stitched and embroidered bed sheets and mosquito nets.</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>Ibemcha</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>Puraana Bazar</b>	<b>Bananas and banana leaves</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>7</b>	<b>Indira</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>Laxmi bazaar</b>	<b>Locally stitched Blouses and Dupattas</b>	<b>3 and ½</b>
<b>8</b>	<b>Subita</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>Linthoingambi</b>	<b>Fishing net and other misc. items</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>9</b>	<b>Shyama</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>Laxmi</b>	<b>Handloom and embroidery items</b>	<b>29</b>

<b>10</b>	<b>Bimala</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>Linthoingambi</b>	<b>Towels and other misc.products</b>	<b>35</b>
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The collected primary data have been analysed and incorporated theoretically in each chapters appropriating to the research objectives which have been set. Each chapter has been presented with the articulation of appropriate secondary body of literatures and analysed thoroughly with the empirical data which have been gathered during field work.

### **I.5: Significance of the study**

The increasing rate of participation of women in the market in recent times had drawn an attention of scholars from diverse disciplines and started analysing critically the impact of economic participation in women’s lives and well being. The availability of easy loans through micro finance credit organisations had given a boost in women’s entrepreneurship. This study will be an addition to the literatures on the impact of women entrepreneurship in their lives and well-being.

### **I.6: Limitations of the study**

Ima market is one of the largest markets of its kind in the world. Accommodating more than 7000 women traders, it is not enough to study all the aspects of this market within a short period of time. An ethnographical project of long exposure to the field will do justice to an social anthropological analysis of this kind of institution. Time is big issue in this current project because of which many different aspects of Ima market and women traders could not be covered. As this is a women centric market, it was a challenging task for the researcher, being a male, to actually sit with the women traders and listen to their narratives. It is required to make a connection with the women traders. And there was a conflict between the pavement sellers and the women traders during the time of fieldwork that is why researcher could not interview the women traders who do their business on the footpath which also constitute the sizeable number.

The present work is organized in different chapters as follows. In Chapter 1 an attempt has been made to analyse the concept of market as an institution and its role in the society and also discusses theoretically how this market as a 'space' has been defined by the women for themselves through their lived experiences. And also brings out the emerging social relationships in this market space. The last part of this chapter analyses the role of market as an agency of women and how it helps them to assert and construct their identity in a patriarchal society of Manipur. Chapter 2 dwells on the critical analysis of the role of micro-finance and individual investors which are mushrooming in this market to provide loans to the women traders. It also focuses on the critique of the neoliberal economic policies. Chapter 3 deals with analysis of how women and this particular market affect each other and the dilemma of the women have drawing from the narratives of the respondents. The concluding chapter summarizes the findings and observations of the study as a whole.

## Chapter 2: Market: a Space and an Agency

### **2.1: Market as an institution: a sociological approach**

Market is a place of exchange and the construction of economy is in terms of market, which is in turn a social institution of economic exchange. In classical and neo-classical economic theories market is a place of exchange to fulfil the needs and it allows the possibility to compete among the actors who join the market. Individual actor is given more importance in classical utilitarian economics, defining an actor as a “rational” being who utilizes every possible opportunity in order to maximize his/her own profit. Hence, an actor in a market competes with one another and the action undertaken is an economic rational action. The economist traditionally identifies rational action with the efficient use of scarce resources<sup>9</sup>.

However, this concept has been critically analysed in the social anthropological traditions, especially in economic sociology. In discussing the individual actor, the sociologist focuses on the actor as a socially constructed entity, as

*“.....actor-in-interaction,’ or ‘actor-in-society’.....sociologists take the group and the social-structural levels as phenomena Sui generis, without reference to the individual actor”.* (Smelser & Swedberg, 2005)<sup>10</sup>.

Classical sociologist, Weber, in his introductory chapter to *Economy and Society*, constructed his sociology based on the individual actions. But these actions are of interest to the sociologist only insofar as they are social actions or

*“...take account of the behaviour of other individuals and thereby are oriented in their course”* (Weber [1922] 1978).

He also illustrated that an economic action can be rational, traditional or effectual. So, sociologists take into account of other various social aspects which influence the economic action of an individual actor and also focuses on how that action affect the interacting individuals.

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<sup>9</sup> As discussed in the book “Handbook of Economic Sociology” ed. by Neil J. Smelser & Richard Swedberg(2005)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.



The various social attributes of an actor as an economic agent in the market is taken into as an important account in sociological understanding of the market as an institution. Market is supposed to be a space where all the social attributes disappears and only the rational action of competition and exchange is counted. However, in the sociological analysis of the market, social attributes such as class, caste, ethnicity, religion and gender becomes an important aspects which one cannot ignore. It is more important in the study of markets such as the field of the present work which is exclusively run by the womenfolk in a society which is very much guided by the patriarchal social norms. In a patriarchal society the sexual division of labour is guided by the norms which restricts women more into their mobility and put them secluded in the household performing the responsibilities of being a caregiver.

In a patriarchal social system, the public space such as markets is predominantly occupied by men. However, in the case of Manipur, most of the markets are considered to be a space for women. And Ima market which is the field of the present study is one of the many women centric markets exist in the Indian state of Manipur. As Manipur society is guided by the patriarchal social norms in its workings, existence of such market as a space exclusive for women needs a deep social-anthropological investigation. It is also important to analyse how the actors, women traders or entrepreneurs in this case, define this market space as per their lived experiences.

## **2.2: Market: as a Space**

The idea of social space and how it is defined by the social actors who are living the space is very necessary in order to study such market like Ima market which is a space for women in patriarchal social system. It is also necessary to dive into the stories of the lived experiences of the women entrepreneurs, of the spatiality and reflection in the emerging relationships. This market has become a space for women to take the economic responsibilities of the family and for them in Manipur. Women from various parts of the state come every day to Ima market to sell their products or as a supplier to the traders. All women, be it weavers, farmers, etc. are all connected with this market to earn a living and help the economy of the family and the society as a whole. As one of the respondents, Mala, narrated,

*“I have been in the market for the last ten years and I can’t imagine a day without coming here even if I don’t have any sales. I feel like this is a family now, even when I am*

*sick I try to come here and it's energetic. My fellow traders are almost like my family whom I share every happy and sad moments and stories of my life”.*

Market is a public domain which is separated from the private (household/family) to fulfil the economic needs of the people in society; however, as per the narrative mentioned above it is clear that it is not just the fulfilment of the economic needs and exchange in the market but also connection women have with other traders. Not just the competition among them but also the sharing of life experiences and trying to relate with each other. Also shared by another respondent Babita from the Laxmi market that,

*“For the last nine years I have been sharing my sorrows and happiness with the **Ima**(referring to the next woman who sit beside her) I feel her as my relative, she is more closed to me than my relatives, I don't quite often meet my relatives and neighbours to share what's happening in life, but I share with Ima almost everything, she knows me better than anybody in my family and relatives now”.*

This clearly states that there is a blurry line between the public and private domains and also this market has become a space shared by women living in the same society. Though they cannot be termed as homogenous in all sense, they share certain relatable lived experiences of being a woman. As Freshwater(2005) analyses that space can be a place where one reflect and *“to expand knowledge and experience of self and others: ....a place for coming to consciousness..”*<sup>11</sup> Thus, Ima market becomes a space for women traders to not only conduct their business but also to reflect upon their lives and relate with others. This has been seen in the statement of one of the respondents Medha, (56 years) from the Linthoingambi Market,

*“It's been 26 years I am in the market. I have seen many changes in these years and life also has undergone many changes and the miseries of life can be forgotten only when I come to the market and share this with other women traders. I came to know that each one of us have more or less similar stories though we all came from different families.”*

To analyse this illusory boundary of the two different spaces, Goffman(1959) has examined that the notion of front(public) spaces and back (private) spaces is explored in

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<sup>11</sup> Discussed in the article, “The poetics of Space: researching the concept of spatiality through relationality” by Dawn Freshwater in the book “Psychodynamic Practice: Individuals, Groups and Organisations, 11:2, pp177-187 (2005).

relation to the internal and external world of the actor and it is posited in the role of reflection.(Goffman 1959, Freshwater, 2005). Ima market is also a *reflective space*<sup>12</sup> for women traders. In search of a livelihood and perform their economic responsibilities, the women in the market (public space) reflects upon their lives in the family(private) relating to the fellow traders and their collective consciousness of being woman. The sharing of life stories and everyday miseries in the market other than their trading make them more closer to one another and they have created this space as an escape as it is reflected in the accounts of Subita, a 47 years old, who is a divorcee. She narrated,

*“I was quite depressed after I got divorced from my husband and I don’t have any children, but somehow one of my relatives suggested me to buy a stall in this market with the amount of alimony I got and I did it and came out to start a business of selling bananas. My sales volume fluctuates but it really doesn’t matter as long as I am happy here. Sometimes mingling with these women here makes me forget that those incidents (she refers to her divorce) had happened in my life. And I realised that it is not just me but there are many others who is going through the same tough life. Now I stay in a rental apartment alone but my fellow traders here (in the market) are my family who listens to my stories and share the ups and downs of my life”.*

Hence, this market space which is run and managed by women alone has become a place for women traders to earn and also reflect on their own lives relating to others’. Sociologically, this reflection and sharing of certain consciousness is because they belong to the same category of being women in a patriarchal society.

The historical account of the market unfolds that it started as result of the custom called *lallup kaaba* which required adult male members of Manipuri society to stay away for a long period of time and work for the king. This situation compelled women in Manipur to come out of home and started this process of exchange to fulfil their economic needs. It eventually resulted in the establishment of this institution called Ima market which is a women centric (Singh, 2015)<sup>13</sup>. This market has been ‘normalised’ in due course of time as a

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<sup>12</sup>Cited in the article, “The poetics of Space: researching the concept of spatiality through relationality” by Dawn Freshwater in the book “Psychodynamic Practice: Individuals, Groups and Organisations, 11:2, pp177-187 (2005).

<sup>13</sup> As discussed in the article “MARKET IN MEDIEVAL MANIPUR” by W Jyotirmoy Singh, Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, Vol. 76 (2015), pp. 300-304.

place for women. In this market no man are allowed to own a stall or a property, the process of descending the stall or the property also does along the lines of the female.

While considering the market as a social institution it is important to look into the emerging social relationships in the market among the women entrepreneurs. Ima market has served the economic needs of the women traders to be economically independent and help in the family's income. Many of the women are the sole breadwinner of the family. Economic action or exchange is always been rooted into the complex social relationships. Granovetter(1992) argued that "*economic action is constrained and shaped by the structures of social relations in which all real economic actors are embedded.....it is embedded in the complex ongoing network of personal relations rather than carried out by atomized actors.*"<sup>14</sup>

The social relationships emerges among the women entrepreneurs in Ima market. And these relationships play an important role in the functioning of the market. The women's action in the market is shaped by *the structural, institutional and cultural embeddedness of market exchange* (Dobbin 2004; Fligstein 2001; Granovetter 1985; White1981). *This reveals market exchange to be a form of social interaction that cannot be explained by a "natural propensity to truck, barter and exchange" (Smith 1976: 17), but only by the institutional structures, social networks, and horizons of meaning within which market actors meet*<sup>15</sup>. (Beckert:2009)

This social relationship not only influences the exchange in the market but also in owning a property. As it is observed that most of the women entrepreneurs who occupy the three markets viz Purana Bazaar, Laxmi Market and Linthoingambi keithel are drawn from Meitei community which is considered to be the dominant of all the various ethnic communities in Manipur. A very few Women who belong to other ethnic communities like Muslim and other tribes occupy stall to conduct business. Tribal and Muslim women who live in the far off villages and the hills join the market as suppliers of agricultural produce and become a part of those traders who conducts their business on the footpath of the market.

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<sup>14</sup> Quoted from the article "Economic Institutions as Social Constructions: A Framework for Analysis" By mark Granovetter (1992).

<sup>15</sup> As discussed in the article "The social order of Markets" by Jens Beckert, 2009.

In the social structure of a market, the pavement sellers constitute the most deprived group<sup>16</sup>. These are the women who can afford a stall in the market or cannot find a way to rent a space in the market. The *social capital*<sup>17</sup> plays an important role for a woman to find a stall to buy or rent in the Ima Market and it is reflected in the words of many respondents. As Bhabini, a 57 years old fruit vendor narrated,

*“When my husband was alive, he wanted to buy me a stall in the market so that I could go out and earn for myself. However, during that time I didn’t know anyone who could find me a stall in the market so we didn’t get any to buy or rent. But after the demise of my husband, to move with the phase of my life I started searching for a place, and finally through one of the distant relative I got this stall (the current one) in rent.....”*

This is not just in the case of her but also with other women. Most of them have got a space here in the market through some connections as Ibemcha narrated in a bit sarcastic tone that *“having a lot of money doesn’t get a place here (laughter), only the people who are blessed by the lairembi (referring to the Goddess installed in the premise of the Purana Bazaar) and those who have connections. Here in this keithel connection matters...”*

The above statement reflects that there is a sense of pride among the women who got a vendor in this market. However, this market has provided a platform for women entrepreneurs to be economically independent and to be able to help themselves and the family. This is obvious that the market acts as an agency for the women to be independent and empowered to certain extent. Hence, let us try to analyse how this market acts as an agency for the women entrepreneurs in Manipur.

### **2.3 Market as an Agency.**

Sen(1984) defined ‘agency’ as what a person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important. *“Agency invokes an ability to overcome barriers, to question or confront situations of oppression and deprivation, and, as individuals or together with others, to have influence and be heard in society”*<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Discussed in the book “Gender, Matriliney and entrepreneurship among the khasi women” By Tiplut Nongbri, 2008.

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<sup>18</sup> Quoted from, “Well-Being, Agency and Freedom: The Dewey Lectures 1984” By Amartya Sen, JOP, Vol82 No4 (April 1985)

Women by participating in the market as traders, they exercise their agency of choosing their workplace outside the home. *“While women work long hours every day at home, since this work does not produce a remuneration it is often ignored in the accounting of the respective contributions of the women and men in the family’s joint prosperity. When the work is done outside the home and the employed woman earns a wage, her contributions to the family’s prosperity is more visible. She also has more voice, because of being less dependent on others”* (Beneria: 1982, Jain & Banerjee, 1985, Afsar: 1998, Sen, 2000)<sup>19</sup>

The above statement is reflected in the words of Babita, a trader participant from the Laxmi Market. She says,

*“Before I came out to the market, I was a weaver but I didn’t earn much, every big financial decision was taken by my husband as he was the main earner in the family. During the time of tough financial situations, I didn’t have a solution as I didn’t earn as I am doing right now. Since I had come out to this market starting this business, I also can contribute to the financial responsibilities of my husband, sometimes when his business goes down, mine is kept as a back-up. My elder son’s educational fees are all born by me.”*

Similar narratives has been made by other respondent, Indira, a vegetable vendor narrates, *“ I was not able to find myself a solution to the financial problems in the family before I started selling these(banana). Now I contribute more than half in the family income and children’s education .....”*

Ima market has given a relief to the financial problems and could provide an opportunity for the women entrepreneurs to be independent economically. They are able to have a voice in the decision making in their private domain too. And, women who come from well off families, also emphasized the financial freedom as Pramodini, a trader who sells traditional sweets and puffed rice quoted, *“My husband is a government employee but I don’t want to depend on him financially, and also I don’t want to be heard in the family issues. Since I started running this business I never ask for a rupee to my husband though he is responsible for all the large financial needs. And I help in most of my children’s monthly expenses.”*

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<sup>19</sup> See book “Development as Freedom” By Amartya Sen, OUP, 2000 pp.194-195.

Instead of generalising women as marginalised, exploited and without agency, it is necessary to identify the different spaces and complex ways in which women exercise agency within patriarchal structures.(Kandiyoti.1988, Arabandi,2016) women use agency to construct their own lives. However, it also observed that most of the women traders in the market have a dual role to perform, one of a caregiver in the family and as an entrepreneur in the market.

The women entrepreneurs who has stepped into the market to earn income and save the family from economic sufferings and also the women who have joined the market to enlighten herself face huge domestic chores which are left for her after returning exhausted from the market or the workplace. Do the social norms permit women to retreat from her domestic household chores after the day's work in order to be able to deal effectively with the outside environment again? The answer is both yes and no. When asked about how they manage these two different roles, Bimala narrated how she used to struggle when she was new to the market and was not that successful in her business. She says,

*“In the beginning when I was new to the market and was not doing well in my business. It was so difficult to take care of all the household chores and again come to the market for daily business. My children were small then. Now as I have established myself here in the market and my children have also grown up to be able to help me in the household activities. Sometimes my husband helps in cooking and now I can tell him to help me without any hesitation since I am helping him with my earning.”*

This clearly indicates the relationship between their economic independence and empowerment to voice their opinion in the household. Kabeer(2008) argued that women's agency leads to empowerment when its exercise questions, challenges, or changes regressive norms and institutions that perpetuate the subordination of women. Women exercise their agency in many ways: as individuals and collectively. The women in the Ima market have a collective identity of being Manipuri women and many political uprisings in the history of Manipur. Two Nupilal( women's war) in 1912 and 1939 can be mentioned as greatest resistance movement against the oppressive colonial policies<sup>20</sup>. Not only these the infamous naked protest which is against the Armed Forces Special Powers' Act 1958 was also staged by the women traders of Ima market. Many participants in the study believe that any political

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<sup>20</sup> See article, " Nupi Lan: Manipur Women's agitation, 1939" by S Yambem, EPW 1976.

movement in the state is not possible without the involvement of the women of Ima market. This is reflected in the words of respondent like Shyama, a handloom vendor. She says,

*“when I am here in the market. I feel like nothing can suppress me. All of us unite every time there is a political turmoil in the state. In any issue, nothing is successful without us. Remember, we chased Indian army out of our kangla( the place where naked protest was staged)”*

It is also true that no political uprisings in any issue go without the involvement of the Imas from the Ima market. The women traders in the market strongly believe in the collective strength. By being together women traders have been able to assert their collective identity and resist much political oppression like AFSPA 1958 etc. From the accounts of the respondent women traders, it is obvious that this market being an agency, women entrepreneurs in Manipur could make visible in the public domain in the society and economically independent. It also provides a platform for women to earn a living and be financially independent and contribute to the income generation of the family. However, it is also important to understand that how these women are running their trade. Are they depending upon their family members to get a capital to start with or are they getting any loans from the nationalised banks. As per the observation, women in this market hugely depend on the mushrooming numbers of micro-credit financial institutions and the individual investors who came to these women to provide loans to start their business. Lets us see in the following chapter the pros and cons of taking loans from the private micro-credit financial companies



### **Chapter 3: Women Entrepreneurs and Microfinance**

The era of neoliberalism is witnessing the emergence of new mechanisms of rule and a proliferation of innovative institutional forms that take on governance functions formerly assigned to the state. The neoliberal economic policy which started in the 1980s and strongly implemented post 1990s proposed the country to fasten the rate of economic growth(Sharma:2006)<sup>21</sup>. The private micro-credit financial organisations have got a rise in number during this era in order to uplift the poor and promote the micro enterprises and to help in empowering women. Mayoux(1998) has analysed the impact of micro credit organisations in the empowerment of women using different approaches. She discusses two different approaches viz *financial sustainability approach* where empowerment is defined in individual and economic terms, particularly increased incomes, but assuming also control over such incomes, and contribution to social and political empowerment. Secondly, *the feminist empowerment approach* where empowerment is seen as transformation of gender and class relations. Here the main aim of micro-finance is an entry point for feminist mobilization<sup>22</sup>

Therefore it is important to look into how the micro credit financial organisations have had an impact in the empowerment of the women entrepreneurs. Ima market is comprised of women entrepreneurs who are illiterate or semi literate running the trade in a very traditional model. Most of them were out of the formal banking system till recently when government initiatives compels them to open a zero balance bank accounts in the nationalised banks so that they can apply for the MUDRA loan Scheme. However, with the increased number of microcredit financial organisations in the state of Manipur in the recent times, Ima market becomes the largest target for these financial institutions. Moreover, there are many individual investors who are coming to the market to deliver micro credit loans to the women entrepreneurs in the market. It is important to analyse how these organisations and individuals are helping women entrepreneurs in providing resources or capital to run

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<sup>21</sup> See discussion in the article, "Crossbreeding Institutions, Breeding Struggle: Women's Empowerment, Neoliberal Governmentality, and State (Re) Formation in India" by Aradhana Sharma, Cultural anthropology, Vol 21 (Feb, 2006).

<sup>22</sup> As discussed in Linda Mayoux (1998), "Women's Empowerment and Micro-Finance Programmes: Strategies for Increasing Impact". DIP, Vol 8, 1998.

their businesses. And it is also important to note that to what extent women entrepreneurs are benefitting.

Most of the participants of the current study are the women entrepreneurs who started their business with a meagre amount of capital and some of them even are the lone breadwinners of the family who are not from financially sound households. Let us try to look at the narratives of the participants, Medha quoted,

*“Twenty five years ago when I started this business here in the market I started with just two thousand rupees and it was very difficult to get loans from the banks. For just a loan of twenty thousand rupees, a long process which is very complicated was needed. But Nowadays because of the small banks coming to provide loans to us, it is easy to get money to run the business.”*

In terms of delivery of loans, the microcredit banks are more effective and easily accessible to the women entrepreneurs in the Ima market. Sharma (2011) analyses that as microcredit is considered to be an entry point in a wider strategy for enlarging poor women's livelihood options and agency. He further explains that microcredit emerged as a strategy to address the institutionalised exclusion of the poor, especially women, from formal financial system<sup>23</sup>. This has been justified in the words of Indira,

*“I approached State Bank for loan to start the business but it needed a government employee as guarantor and I don't have anyone in the family to be the guarantor and the process of getting loan was very complicated which I couldn't understand. So when I came out to this market I met people who came to me to invest their money. My entire business runs with the loans from them. It is much easier to get money from them. They are very helpful”.*

This indicates that microcredit provides an opportunity to expand self employment and promotes business and entrepreneurial activities. Micro credit delivery is much easier and faster than the nationalised banks. This has been discussed as the gender strategy of micro finance by Mayoux(1998). She analysed that the micro finance delivery should be flexible. She notes,

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<sup>23</sup> See Kumud Sharma in the article “Small Loans, Big Dreams: Women and Microcredit in a Globalising Economy”, EPW, Vol. 46 No. 42 (October 2011).

*“Conditions of micro-finance delivery should be flexible to women's aspirations, needs, and existing strategies. This includes considering the types of loans and savings conditions that would maximize women's control over loan and savings decisions, use, and income generated.”<sup>24</sup>*

The flexibility in delivery of the loans by micro finance organisations benefits those women entrepreneurs who come from households which are economically backward. Since they are not able to approach the nationalised banks for loans for their micro enterprises, micro credit loans are much easier for them to access and repay. This has been reflected in the words of many participants. Most of them depends their enterprises on these loans from micro finance institutions. As Ibemcha quotes,

*“If these loans were not there, it would be very difficult to start and run this business. I could not produce any amount of money to start the business with. But they helped me a lot providing small loans in the beginning and even today. Trust has been developed between us. The payment of loan is also flexible. So it is easier for us to run the trade.”*

In a country like India gender inequalities are visible particularly in resource based entitlements like land and property rights, credit, etc. So, easy access to credit generates income and livelihood options, give women more bargaining power within the household and contribute to the family well-being.<sup>25</sup> The emphasis for providing microcredit to poor women has to be seen in the context where they are predominantly in the informal sector.

However, it is crucial to analyse the role of micro credits in addressing the issue of women empowerment. Gopalan(2001) noted, *“exaggerated focus on microcredit as a solution to poverty has resulted in the neglect by the state and public institutions in seriously addressing the employment and livelihood needs of the poor, especially women within main economic policies. We should pay greater attention to how microcredit is delivered, what are the social, political processes that sustain this approach”*<sup>26</sup>

Microcredit addresses the unemployment issues especially among the women and supports women entrepreneurs providing the capital to start their business and run it

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<sup>24</sup> See discussion in “Women's Empowerment and Micro-Finance Programmes: Strategies for Increasing Impact” by Linda Mayoux (1998).

<sup>25</sup> Refer “Small Loans, Big Dreams: Women and Microcredit in a Globalising Economy” by Kumud Sharma, EPW, 2011.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.25

successfully. And the easy repayment method makes women in the market more empowered economically. This can be found in the narratives of one of the participants, Babita narrates,

*“As I have an established stall now, it is easy to get loans from the microfinance banks and their repayment process is easy and convenient as they come to us to collect here at our stalls. We can repay them in everyday basis and don’t have to go to the banks leaving our business. These small loans are very useful and helpful for women like me who cannot produce huge money to start a business or trade. Even I take these loans for my husband to start a poultry farm.”*

By providing small loans or credits, the micro finance has been successful to certain extent in reaching out to women who are helpless and enabled them to start their own micro enterprises even though most of them are in informal economy. It helps women entrepreneurs in Ima market to be self dependent in terms of their own financial management and income generation which ultimately lead to the larger share in family’s economy and well being.

It is not just these micro credit organisations but the researcher has observed the mushrooming numbers of individual investors who also provides loans to these women entrepreneurs. The interest rates of the loans are more or less similar. Though the loans are easily delivered to women entrepreneurs here in the market, providing the opportunities to give a boost to their micro enterprises, women still have to repay them with high rates of interest and there is no regulation in the fixation of the rate of interests. Rate of interest varies from organisation to organisation and from investor to investor. Sometimes many women become victims of debt because they still have to pay high rate of interest in spite of having meagre amount of earning.

Sharma(2011) highlighted the issue of micro credit not able to solve certain issues. She notes, *“The problem lies not with microcredit but with microenterprises as in the majority of cases low capital, low productivity and meagre earnings, keep these entrepreneurs trapped without any competitive advantage. Microcredit by itself does not change structural issues and needs to be embedded in a range of mutually supportive initiatives in order to have a significant impact on poverty reduction”*<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> See Kumud Sharma article 2011.

She further critically states, *“Microcredit has not done what the majority of microcredit enthusiasts claim it can do, i e, function as capital aimed at increasing the returns to a business activity. It is a good tool as a survival strategy but it is not key to development, which involves massive capital-intensive, state directed investments..... also an assault on the structures of inequalities such as concentration of ownership that systematically deprives the poor of resources to escape poverty. Microcredit coexists with entrenched structures serving as a safety net for the excluded and the marginalised”* (Bello 2006, Sharma 2011) ”<sup>28</sup>

While acknowledging the contribution of microfinance in the reduction of the poverty in the household of the women entrepreneurs, Mayoux(2002) has argued that the overwhelming evidence indicates that this "one-dimensional approach" to credit ignores structural issues (Mayoux 2002). Naila Kabeer (2005) also has analysed the outreach and impact of microfinance from two different dimensions- economic and social impacts. She argues that microfinance organisations play an important role as conduit for new forms of knowledge and information, an important causal factor in promoting women’s economic agency.<sup>29</sup> This is true in the case of the participants of the study. Women under studied have got beneficial from the microcredit organisations even though they have to pay a high rate of interest. It helps them to boost their confidence in building up their enterprises. And secondly she discusses about the social impact of microfinance.

She says *“Loans to women, however, had positive and significant effects on children’s education. While children’s education is frequently found to improve with access to microfinance, the findings on gender disparities are not consistent.”*<sup>30</sup>

This is reflected in the words of Babita, *“My son lives in Bangalore for study. These loans help me a lot in supporting my son’s education. If this was not there, it would be very difficult to run my business as I don’t have any capital to do so and supporting children’s education would be really tough as my husband also doesn’t earn much.”*

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<sup>28</sup> As cited in the article “Small Loans, Big Dreams: Women and Microcredit in a Globalising Economy” by Kumud Sharma, EPW, 2011.

<sup>29</sup> As discussed in the article, “Is microfinance a magic bullet for women’s empowerment?” by Naila Kabeer, EPW, 2005.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid29

This has been justified by many other respondents as well. As Ibemcha pointed out, *“These small loans which are easy to pay are like God’s grace. My entire business is running because of these and I have got the confidence that I will be able to uplift my family and support the education of my children.”* The support which women entrepreneurs can extend to her children’s education and the economy of the family is directly related to the availability of micro credit loans in order to run their trade successfully.

In order to understand the larger social impact of the micro credits on the lives of women entrepreneurs, it is essential to analyse the goals of the micro finance organisations and to locate the position of women entrepreneurs in public as well as private domain. Though it is out of the scope of the present study to investigate the goals of micro finance organisations, we will try to locate the position of women in public as well as private domain from the accounts of women entrepreneurs in Ima market.

In a patriarchal society, household or the private domain plays an important role in the lives of women. It is the place where the basic sexual division of labour is visible and the power relationship which defines the subordination of women. Women stay subordinated and rarely allowed to take part in decision making of the family and the resources in the family is in the hands of male members. Women’s mobility is restricted making the household as the place where they belong to. Since women have come out at Ima market to earn a living for themselves and to contribute to the income generation of the family. It is essential to critically analyse their position in the household as well as the public domain.

Kabeer, again, discussed the impact of micro credit and women entrepreneurship on the lives of women in their private domain. She argues that the women beneficiaries who participate in the micro-finance or take loans to run their microenterprises have increased their bargaining power within the family to some extent and the decision making in the family. She further notes that there has been an increase in the voice of women in household decision making, in some cases, sole decision-maker, and in others, in joint decision making. Her study reveals that access to financial services was found to exacerbate domestic violence in some cases but lead to a decline in others as a result an increase in the size of women’s economic contribution. (Kabeer 2005)<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Naila Kabeer, EPW, Oct. 2005.

Kabeers's analysis is also reflected in the narratives of the women under study. Shyama narrated, *“Before I came out here and start earning, my husband never counted my opinion. Since I started earning, doing well in my business, nowadays I can speak what I want and what I don't want in any planning in the family, be it children's education or buying something new or building a new house. Even during my eldest daughter's marriage I produced a lot of money. So I was very crucial in decision making. “*

In the case of the women participants of the present study most of their narratives reflected that they have a voice in the decision making of the family. Some of them are the sole breadwinner of the family and main decision maker in terms of their children's education. Women like Ibemcha, Indira and Babita can be mentioned. Though it is important to investigate the goals of the microcredit organisations to reach out to these women entrepreneurs, this study could not cover as it is out of the scope of this research. However let us try to see the interface between the market and the women entrepreneurs and how this market plays an important role in the social, economic and political empowerment.

## **Chapter 4: Women-Market Interface**

Market is such an institution of society whose relevance in the daily life of an individual cannot be ignored. Though family is an important site of society particularly the private domain of the society, the significance of market in a modern society cannot be ignored. Both family and market shape one's life. They determine how an individual behaves and learns and works and communicates. In the recent time when world is becoming more and more integrated, the relevance of such institutions of a society is also altering. Rather, this relevance of family and market are quite complementary in nature on life of each male and female member of society in an overdetermined manner. In Indian context, an ideal woman is mother first and mother last. Women's duties as good daughters, good wives and good mothers are well defined in Indian patriarchal society. Wifhood and motherhood are accepted as pivotal roles for women. Women need not pursue any specialized discipline for knowledge, art and profession (Desai and Thakkar 2001).

Women now no longer only run household, rear children, care for aged and sick member of the family, perform economic and non-economic activities within families, but also are to be seen at work in offices, factories and firms. But still Indian society in general devalues women's work outside their families. "*Women's economic status is linked to their family's economic status*", and "*men are bread winners, so they and not women are heads of the household*" (Desai and Thakkar 2001). As the economic scenario is changing, women's lives are also changing. Women started coming out to the male bastions and started working in public spaces. Hence it is important for a researcher to look into how the working in the public spaces is impacting the lives of a woman.

Women are significant contributors to the economic growth of a country. Till the date unpaid household economic activities and even unpaid work of women as family labour (as in farming activities in rural India) are not recognized as economic activities officially and these women do not officially contribute to the GDP or GNP of the country although they help procreating surplus labour and add to the production of a country. Since these unpaid activities of women (whether at the level of households or in the public domain) are not considered as economic activities these groups of women remain outside the standard definition of workforce of the country in the mainstream economic definition of workforce.



So, they constitute the outside although they in reality are inside. They are in this sense inside-outside of the labour force of the country. There is no official data to estimate the number of these women. If we add them to the official figure for the country's workforce then the total workforce would be much larger than what it is today. Keeping these women outside the workforce means that officially we are not recognizing their true contribution in the economy measured in terms of economic growth as growth is now the parameter or indicator to measure the economic performance of a country or society.

In Manipur, women have been contributing in the society. It is evident that women have been participating in many production and income generating activities in the state, being the largest workforce in the society. Be it in weaving, agricultural production or trade, women in Manipur have always had their part. The existence of many women centric markets also provides an agency for the women in Manipur to be financially independent. The Ima market being one of the largest such markets give immense opportunities for the women in Manipur to earn a living for them and to help in the family's well-being.

Lets us try to look at how Ima market has influenced and shaped the lives of the women entrepreneurs in all aspects. Now let us see how the economic participation and accessibility to credit has led to the empowerment of women. As we have learnt that Ima market came into existence as a result of a system called lallup kaaba where all the adult male members of the family had to stay away far from home for a long period of time in service of the kingdom. Women started coming out and fulfilling the economic needs of the family. Since then Ima market has become a full fledged market which is exclusively run and managed by the women. Ima market plays a great role in the economic participation of women making them financially independent. Now let us see the correlation between economic independence and the empowerment of women entrepreneurs.

#### **4.1: Economic Independence and Empowerment**

In spite of the various obstacles women face in a patriarchal society there are growing numbers of participation of women in market. Being the subordinated citizen woman still is continuing her economic activities. However many women work for the survival and for the betterment of the economic conditions of the family. Many women were compelled to work in the market in a competitive world where they discover their potential to earn, to survive and to protect their families from crises. There are also some women who can now choose

any career path they desire. But some are not. They are simply forced to take to any economic activity which they can get in the market to supplement their family income. As a result women's participation in the local as well as global economy has increased.

This visibility of women in the public domain especially in the markets has had a great impact in the empowerment of women. We will discuss the concept of empowerment here in order to be able to connect with the lives of the women entrepreneurs who are part of the current study.

'Empowerment' refers to the process by which power is gained, developed, seized, facilitated or gained. 'Women's empowerment' implies a process by which women is equipped with power to enhance their own capabilities, enlarge their own choices, and thus can contribute to and also benefit from the process of development and thereby reduce the glaring disparities prevalent in all spheres of life (Das Gupta and Srivastava, 2012)<sup>32</sup>. Alternatively one can say that women's empowerment indicates a situation where women gain autonomy over their own lives to improve their personal, social, economic, political conditions so as to achieve greater self-respect in family, society and market.

Keeping the above definition in mind, the question which has been arise is whether the economic participation has any positive influence in the empowerment of the women traders in Ima market?

Let us try to look at the narratives of the women traders in Ima market who has been a part of this current study.

Ibemcha narrated, "*Ima keithel(market) is a temple for me as it provides everything for me. Before I came out to this market, I was a weaver but I didn't earn as much as I do now. I came out to this market searching for a stall to rent when my husband met an accident and dislocated his hands and couldn't work anymore. My earnings from weaving were not enough to run the house and support my children's education. So I started searching for a stall through one of my distant relatives. Now I feel that I took the right decision to come out and start this trading here. Now I am economically independent and am able to support my family and my children's education.*"

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<sup>32</sup> Das Gupta, Madhumita and Ranjana Srivastava (2012): "Determinants of Women Empowerment : A Study of Ranchi Town" in Jharkhand Journal of Social Development. Volume IV, Number 1 & 2, Page 64-7; Ranchi.

This reflects the economic empowerment which women traders got by participating in the market as entrepreneurs. This has been pointed out by Sarkar and Chakravarti(2013) in their study of women flower traders in Bengal. They pointed out the evidences that higher income women have from the trading their assertion of identity and the sense of emancipation is found. Their ability to bargain in the household has increased to certain extent.<sup>33</sup>

Kabeer (2008) also defines empowerment in terms of resources, agency and achievements. She states, “*Empowerment means women’s increased control over their own lives, bodies, and environments.*” She emphasizes women’s decision making roles, their economic self reliance and their legal rights to equal treatment, and the elimination of barriers to access the resources. The components of women’s empowerment include decision making power in the household, access to credit, participation, knowledge and awareness, raising voice, freedom, mobility, respect, economic participation and development in leadership quality. When women have the freedom to choose their own agency to participate in the economic activities, then it paves a way to the emancipation from the patriarchal restrictions.

Ima market has certainly takes a great and inevitable role in the economic empowerment of the women traders in Manipur. Not only this, the market also plays a great part in empowering women politically as well. Most of the political uprisings in the state has been raised by the women traders of the Ima market. Manipuri history had witnessed two great struggles of women in 1904 and 1939 against the oppressive policies of the British administration. In the post independence era also many struggles had raised against the militarisation in the state. The infamous naked mother protest against the atrocities of Indian armed forces under the Armed Forces Special Powers’ Act 1958 was staged by the women traders of Ima market who collectively stood up for a common cause.

The women traders in the Ima market had always proved their collective strength in many political movements in the state of Manipur. Women have a full faith in the united and collective strength. This has been reflected in the narratives of the women respondents.

As Mala narrates, “*I didn’t even think of participating in any strike before I came out here in the market. In the last eight years I have been part of many agitations. Here we get all*

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<sup>33</sup> Refer “Indicators and impact of empowerment: Evidence from Flower trading women in West Bengal” by Debnarayan Sarker and Sanjukta Chakrabarti.(2013)

*the news about everything though I don't read newspapers and all. No issues in Manipur can only be resolved only when we the women in Ima market involve in it."*

Subita also stated that she has realised the power of women when united together only when she came out to Ima market, she says, *"There is nothing we cannot do. If we the women in the market unites, every issue in Manipur is solved, be it army problem (referring to the issue of AFSPA 1958), drug issue, and many other."*

The participation in the market led to the economic empowerment of the women traders which makes them to contribute largely in the economy of the family. And it also makes them realised their strength which they show collectively in any political situation.

Hence it will not be wrong to posit Ima market as a space in Manipur where womenfolk exercise their agency to explore their entrepreneurship skills and to be empowered economically. This market also provides a platform for the women traders to assert their collective identity politically in the patriarchal social system of Manipur. As Sen (2000) rightly pointed out that there is a close connection between women's agency and women's well-being. The connection Sen(2000) has pointed out has been very conspicuously visible among the women traders of ima Market. However the level of impact and emancipation in the society as a whole needs a long ethnographical exposure and in-depth research, which is not possible in the current study.

## **Conclusion: Women entrepreneurs and the Dilemma.**

In the study of women's participation in economic development, it is important to critically analyse the connection between the agency they exercise to be economically independent and their overall well-being. Sen(2000) analyses that there is a plenty of evidence that when women get the opportunities that are typically the preserve of men, they are no less successful in making use of these facilities that men have claimed to be their own over the centuries.<sup>34</sup> This is justified in the case of women traders in Ima market. In many societies market as a social institution has been men preserve. But with the increase in participation of women in the market as entrepreneurs, it has become important to analyse how their economic participation is making a change in the lives of women.

Ima market as a market which is exclusively run and managed by the women of Manipur in a strictly patriarchal society has marked a significant place to study the lives of women entrepreneurs and add to the larger literatures of women in economic development. We have already analysed how this market has been defined as a space for them through the lived experience of the women entrepreneurs in Ima market. Here in this market the women entrepreneurs have successfully asserted their collective identity by exercising their agency and mobility. The easy accessibility of micro credit loans through micro finance organisations helps them boost their entrepreneurship. However due to unregulate norms of providing credit, women entrepreneurs have to pay a high rate of interests. Hence it is important to look into the vision of these micro credit organisations which are thronged in the Ima market which again open up to a new study.

However, it is observed by the researcher during the field study that most of the women entrepreneurs who participated in the study have a common dilemma. In spite of being economically independent and can exercise their agency publicly with the help of this market, most of the women still believe that they were compelled to come out in this market because of the economic necessities or financial responsibilities. The dilemma they have is how long will they be in the market? Most of the participants still believe that home is the place where women belong to. Some of them feel that they will go back home and take the role of a caregiver in home once their children started to earn and improve the economic

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<sup>34</sup> Refer Amartya Sen's "Development as Freedom" OUP,(2000), pp 198-199.

situations in the family. But, when? This is the question women entrepreneurs have in their minds. But it is surely true that the economic participation of women is a reward on its own, in terms of reduction of gender bias in the treatment of women in the family decisions, and a major influence for social change in general.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Sen, Amartya, "Development as Freedom", OUP, 2000, pp 200-201.

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*Picture Illustration*









