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Religion and Gender Equality among the Garos of Bangladesh: Intersections of Belief, Identity, and Social Practice

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Abstract: *The social structure of the Garo ethnic group in Bangladesh is matrilineal, meaning that women have historically held a lot of power in both the home and the society. Hence this study investigates gender among the Garo community and examines the connection between gender and religion. This analysis will also examine how churches and missionary efforts have shaped women's education and leadership, considering the impact of both indigenous beliefs and Christian teachings on gender roles, decision-making, and social justice. Drawing on previous research from the fields of anthropology, sociology, gender studies, and religious studies as well as data from secondary sources, the study shows how religious beliefs both strengthen matrilineal authority and open up new channels for empowerment through religious organizations. At the same time, modernization, policy shifts, and external socio-cultural pressures are shown to generate tensions that complicate gender dynamics. The analysis suggests that rather than eroding gender equity, these challenges demonstrate the Garo community's ability to reinterpret religious principles as cultural resources for resilience and adaptation. This article contributes to a deeper understanding of the interplay of belief, identity, and social practice in shaping gender equality within indigenous contexts in South Asia.*

Keywords: *Garo Community, Gender Equality, Religious Values, Matrilineal Society, Social Justice, Empowerment.*

Introduction

Gender equality is widely recognized as a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of sustainable development (United Nations, 2023). In Bangladesh, where the Constitution guarantees equality irrespective of gender, religion, or ethnicity, the lived experiences of different communities reveal variations shaped by cultural traditions and religious values (Government of Bangladesh, 2011). Among the country's indigenous groups, the Garo stand out for their matrilineal system, in which lineage and inheritance pass through the female line, granting women distinctive authority within the family and community (Burling, 1997).

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The Garo population in Bangladesh, estimated at around 120,000, is concentrated primarily in the districts of Mymensingh, Netrokona, Gazipur, and Sherpur (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics [BBS], 2022). Compared to many other indigenous communities, Garo women demonstrate relatively higher literacy rates, with education strongly supported by missionary institutions and church-based initiatives (Sangma, 1987).

The relationship between religion and gender equality is theoretically complex. Scholars emphasize that religion often plays a dual role: it may reinforce patriarchal traditions while simultaneously providing resources and legitimacy for women's empowerment (Moghadam, 2019; Mahmood, 2005). In the case of the Garos of Bangladesh, indigenous cosmologies have historically reinforced matrilineal authority by situating women at the center of kinship, inheritance, and household decision-making. With the spread of Christianity during the colonial and postcolonial periods, new institutional frameworks—particularly schools, churches, and community organizations emerged, which further expanded women's opportunities for education and leadership. This dual influence highlights the significance of studying how religious values contribute to both the preservation and transformation of gender dynamics.

This article, therefore, examines the role of religious values in promoting gender equality among the Garos of Bangladesh. It considers how Christianity and indigenous beliefs intersect to reinforce or challenge matrilineal practices, while also analyzing the implications of modernization, state policies, and broader socio-cultural pressures for contemporary gender relations. The study area focuses on Garo communities in north-central Bangladesh, and the research is based entirely on secondary sources. Insights are drawn from anthropology, sociology, religious studies, and gender scholarship, allowing for a synthesis of existing knowledge that situates the Garo experience within the national discourse on gender equality and indigenous rights.

Gender Equality

Gender equality is a culturally entrenched practice that is influenced by social practices, belief systems, and identity rather than just being a universal standard of equal rights and opportunities. Religion is a transforming force that opens up new possibilities for women's empowerment as well as a stabilizing force that upholds matrilineal authority. Indigenous identity and gender equality are inextricably linked in the largely patriarchal society of Bangladesh; matriliny can thus serve as a social justice tool in addition to being a cultural marker. This intersection manifests itself in daily life through the leadership positions that women hold in church-based organizations, the inheritance patterns that favour daughters, and the voices of women in family councils.

Using Naila Kabeer's (1999) empowerment framework of resources, agency, and accomplishments, the study captures these interactions and allows for an evaluation of how religious values influence women's social status and resilience. In this way, this paper advances our knowledge of how belief, identity, and social practice connect to shape gender equality among Bangladesh's Garos by fusing theoretical viewpoints with empirical insights from secondary data.

Methodological Framework

The methodological framework for this investigation is a descriptive qualitative methodology based on secondary sources. The data has been gathered from published research, including journal articles, research reports, and policy papers, specifically drawn from the academic fields of anthropology, sociology, gender studies, and religious studies. The re-use and close analysis of primary data allow for the critical review of existing knowledge to identify patterns, recurring themes, and scholarly arguments concerning the historical influence of both indigenous cosmologies and Christian teachings on Garo social structures. This analytical approach enables a nuanced examination of how religious values shape gender roles, decision-making, and social practices. Furthermore, the methodology is designed to expose the effects of external pressures such as modernization, policy shifts, and broader socio-cultural change on contemporary gender dynamics within the community. By situating the Garo experience within established theoretical and empirical discussions, the methodology ensures the analysis is grounded in supporting scholarly literature related to gender equality and indigenous rights.

Literature Review

This paper synthesizes research work relevant to the intersection of religion, gender, and social practice among the Garo in Bangladesh. It is organized into two parts: the first part focuses on the specific dynamics of gender roles within the Garo matrilineal system, while the second part situates the Garo as an indigenous community within the broader contexts of Bangladesh and South Asia, focusing on cultural and religious identity.

The Indigenous Garo Community

The Garos in Bangladesh are but one of many indigenous groups, each working out their own conditions and relations with the State and the majority Bengali population. The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (2022) provides necessary demographic data on these communities, placing them within the context of size and distribution. As an indigenous group, the Garos maintain an identity that is intrinsically linked to their customs, land, and distinctive social organization. Although the Constitution of Bangladesh ensures a legal framework for minorities, the lived experience of indigenous communities often reveal pressures toward assimilation and cultural change. Among these changes, religious conversion to

Christianity is one of the most significant contemporary transformations within the Garo. Religious conversion and ethnic identity in South Asian groups are closely intertwined within the broader movement of people (Denton & Evans, 2019). It is not a question of simple replacement whereby one set of beliefs replaces another; rather, a syncretic identity forms whereby traditional custom and new religions live together, informing and changing each other. Additionally, modernization and urbanization pose serious threats to the matrilineal structure of Garo society. Mia and Rabbani (2024) analyzed the changes in Garo communities under conditions of urbanization. They argued and identified that when urban migration and involvement in a wage economy are faced, traditional kinship patterns and inheritance tend to wear away. This process of cultural shift indicates how Garo identity is structurally reshaped by religious, economic, and social forces. For other matrilineal groups of the region, such as the Khasis, scholarship from Gurdon (1914) may already stand as something of a historical baseline, but contemporary research keeps emphasizing how a community like the Garo can adapt and keep living through changes in the course of deeply changing social life.

Gender Roles and the Garo

The Garo, being traditionally matrilineal, are a unique case for examining gender roles and power structure. Matrilineality, however, does not equate to matriarchy, or full female dominance. Scholars have closely scrutinized these nuances of female authority within such systems, citing the fact that though women in matters like inheritance and descent may enjoy considerable advantages, their practical powers can be constrained. Bal (2017) argues property and inheritance are crucial to gender dynamics in the Garo context. Traditionally, property, especially ancestral land, is passed down the female line, often to a chosen daughter. To be sure, this economic foothold gives women a certain degree of security and influence. Roesler (2014) examined women's participation in Bangladeshi Garo society, discussing how the matrilineal tradition influences their social and political agency. This agency, however, is not fixed. It is a complex negotiation, shaped both by cultural tradition and by external pressures (Kabeer, 1999).

One critical aspect of inquiry is how religion influences these established roles. Religion is a powerful force that often shapes and reinforces gender norms (Butler, 2019). Many Garos have converted to Christianity, which introduces a different belief and organizational system. Bal (2017) examined the Garo community's cultural transformation, noting that although conversion to Christianity gave them access to education and a strong modern identity, it also had a significant impact on traditional matrilineal practices, gradually changing gender roles and family values toward more patriarchal structures typical in mainstream society. This interplay is further complicated by the patriarchal piety that so often inheres in dominant religious revivals (cf. Mahmood, 2005), creating a complex field in

which traditional Garo matriliny interacts with the gender ideologies of Christianity and the surrounding patriarchal society.

Gender Equality

Gender equality is considered a basic principle within global discourse. It is defined broadly as equal value, rights, and opportunities for individuals regardless of gender identity. There have been two major definitions that attempt to articulate this concept. The United Nations defines gender equality as a situation where women and men have equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities. Importantly, its definition indicates that equality does not mean that women and men will become the same, but rather women and men should enjoy the same rights and opportunities, hence, their rights and opportunities will not depend on whether they were born as a boy or girl. It also considers gender equality from a human rights viewpoint, and the "precondition for, and indicator of, sustainable people-centered development" (United Nations, n.d., para. 1). According to UNICEF, the concept requires all genders to have equal resources, opportunities, rights, and protection. It also further adds that such a state can be achieved only by valuing the similarities and differences of all individuals and letting all persons exercise their full potential without stereotypical limits created by gender (UNICEF, 2017, p. 1).

This paper furthers the theory of syncretic gender resilience to understand the unusual persistence of gender equality among the Garos. According to this theory, in indigenous contexts facing modernizing and patriarchal pressures, the preservation of gender parity cannot come about through the isolation or simple resistance of local cultures; rather, it is the product of a syncretic adaptation process. The theory particularly proposes that the persistent matrilineal social structure of the Garos provides a strong structural base, which was further strengthened and legitimized by Christianity through the institutional resources and values brought in by this religion. This selective integration of the new religious faith into the already existing cultural governance leads to a resilient gender system, one that succeeds in countering the dominant patriarchal norms of the surrounding national culture, allowing Garo women to translate their traditional authority into forms of social and public agency in contemporary life.

The theory of gender resilience is tested by Kabeer's conceptual framework of women's empowerment which is organized around three components of resources, voice and agency. The study has taken into consideration three interrelated components which are : first, the Matrilineal Foundation establishing women's central role in inheritance and domestic decision-making; second, Religious Syncretism, which assesses how Christian institutions provide modern forms of agency (e.g., education, leadership roles) in support of this traditional authority; and third, the Lived Realities of Resilience assesses observable outcomes in social practice-such as women's active political participation and economic control-that

demonstrate the community's capacity to maintain gender equality as a defining cultural feature.

Historical and Socio-Cultural Background of the Garo Community

The Garo community is one of the largest indigenous ethnic groups in Bangladesh and Northeast India, primarily residing in the Mymensingh, Netrokona, and Sherpur districts of Bangladesh, as well as in the Indian state of Meghalaya (Burling, 1997). Historically, the Garos are of Tibeto-Burman origin and are believed to have migrated from Tibet and settled in the northeastern hills of India and parts of Bangladesh (Sangma, 2007). Their society is distinct from many other South Asian communities due to their matrilineal social structure, where lineage, inheritance, and property pass through the female line.

Burling (1997) observes that the matrilineal system of the Garo community profoundly shapes gender relations and family structures. This is most clearly seen in the inheritance of ancestral property by women and the specific role of the youngest daughter, or *nokna*, who is designated to ensure family and lineage continuity (pp. 34–38). Despite this unique social structure, men still play important roles in decision-making, particularly in political and religious affairs. The matrilineal system, however, provides women with a level of economic and social security that is uncommon in many patriarchal societies in South Asia (Burling, 1997).

The Garo people traditionally practiced animism and worshipped nature spirits, with rituals and festivals deeply rooted in indigenous beliefs (Sangma, 1987). However, Christianity, particularly Catholicism and Protestantism, became widely adopted among the Garos during the British colonial period, leading to significant socio-cultural transformations. Christian missionaries played a vital role in introducing formal education, healthcare, and social reforms that affected gender relations within the community (Sangma, 1987). Many Garos today blend Christian beliefs with their indigenous traditions, which continue to shape their perspectives on gender equality and social roles (Ralte, 2018).

Cultural practices among the Garos emphasize communal living, strong kinship ties, and egalitarian principles within families. Women enjoy greater autonomy in economic activities, and their status is reinforced through traditional leadership systems such as the role of the *nokma* (village chief). Festivals such as Wangala (harvest festival) celebrate their indigenous heritage and reinforce community cohesion (Sangma, 2007). Although modernization and urbanization have influenced Garo society, the matrilineal tradition continues to be a defining feature of their identity. This historical and socio-cultural background provides a foundation for understanding how religious values interact with existing gender norms in the Garo community. The interplay between matrilineal traditions and Christian influences highlights the complexity of gender equality in this unique ethnic group.

Education and Women's Empowerment in the Garo Community

Education plays a crucial role in shaping gender equality and empowering women in the Garo community. Historically, Garo women have held a unique position in society due to the matrilineal inheritance system, which grants them economic security and social status (Burling, 1997). However, access to formal education has further strengthened their role in leadership, decision-making, and community development. With the influence of Christian missionary activities, education has become a key driver in enhancing women's agency and broadening their opportunities beyond traditional roles. Christian missionaries introduced formal education in the Garo community during the British colonial period, significantly transforming gender roles (Sangma, 1987). Before this, traditional education was informal, focusing on oral history, folklore, and skills required for daily life (Ralte, 2018). Missionary schools provided literacy and vocational training, which enabled Garo women to participate in professions beyond household and agricultural labour. As a result, education became a catalyst for women's empowerment, allowing them to engage in sectors such as healthcare, teaching, and community leadership.

The quantitative data highlights the enhanced agency and participation of Garo women, particularly in the context of their community in Bangladesh. Recent research suggests a shifting trend toward shared domestic agency among the Garo. As Mia and Rabbani (2024) observe, the pressures of the urban wage economy have fostered a move toward joint decision-making between husbands and wives. This evolution complements the traditional matrilineal structure where, as Bal (2017) notes, women have long maintained significant influence over household and ancestral matters (pp. 112–115). Furthermore, Garo women demonstrate impressive social participation, with 74% actively involved in local social organizations, indicating their enhanced ability to participate in the broader community. This empowerment is intricately linked to rising educational attainment, as Garo women often surpass their male counterparts in educational qualification, a factor that directly translates into a stronger voice both within the family unit and in society at large (Rashed et al., 2019).

Gender Equality in Educational Attainment

Unlike many other South Asian communities where gender disparities in education persist, Garo girls have benefited from equal access to schooling due to their community's acceptance of female leadership (Sattar, 1971). Recent studies indicate that literacy rates among Garo women are higher compared to other indigenous groups in Bangladesh, largely due to the community's emphasis on education as a tool for empowerment (Ralte, 2018). For instance, a 2009 study of Garos in the Mymensingh district of Bangladesh reported the female literacy rate as 12.01%, compared to 12.66% for males, indicating a minimal gender gap in literacy within the community at that time (BRAC, as cited in Hossain, Das, Tahsin & Raisa, 2021, p. 16).

However, challenges remain. Economic constraints, early marriage, and urban migration sometimes hinder women's continued education and career progression. Additionally, the shift from a traditional agrarian economy to modern employment sectors has created new gender dynamics, requiring Garo women to navigate both traditional expectations and contemporary professional roles (Sangma, 2007). Education has paved the way for Garo women to participate in leadership positions, including political roles, religious organizations, and social activism. Many educated Garo women have become advocates for gender rights, social justice, and indigenous representation, further reinforcing the community's progressive stance on gender equality. Furthermore, Christian institutions have played a dual role on one hand, promoting literacy and social mobility, and on the other, reinforcing certain patriarchal structures within church leadership (Sattar, 1971). While Garo women hold economic power within their families, religious leadership still remains predominantly male-dominated. However, with increasing educational attainment, women have begun to challenge these structures, advocating for greater inclusion in decision-making within religious and community institutions (Ralte, 2018).

Challenges to Gender Equality in the Garo Community

Despite the matrilineal structure of the Garo community, which grants women a relatively high status in society, gender equality remains a complex issue. While women inherit property and play significant roles in household decision-making, traditional norms, religious structures, economic challenges, and external socio-cultural influences continue to pose barriers to full gender equality (Burling, 1997). Christianity, which is widely practiced among the Garo people, has played a dual role in shaping gender dynamics. On the one hand, missionary activities have promoted literacy and education among women, contributing to their empowerment. On the other hand, church leadership structures remain predominantly male-dominated, limiting women's participation in religious decision-making (Sattar, 1971). While Garo women enjoy economic rights, they often face restrictions in religious leadership and are discouraged from holding high positions within churches (Ralte, 2018).

Although the Garo community is matrilineal, patriarchal values have increasingly influenced social structures due to urbanization, intermarriage, and external cultural interactions. Many Garo men, influenced by mainstream Bengali and South Asian patriarchal norms, advocate for more male-centered decision-making, challenging the traditional balance of power in households. Some scholars argue that Christian teachings, when interpreted conservatively, reinforce male authority within families, leading to a shift away from traditional female-centered inheritance systems (Sangma, 2007).

While Garo women traditionally inherit land and property, economic modernization has led to increased male dominance in income-generating activities

(Sattar, 1971). With the shift from an agrarian economy to urban employment, many men now control financial resources, reducing women's financial autonomy. Additionally, limited access to high-paying jobs, workplace discrimination, and gender stereotypes continue to affect Garo women's participation in formal employment.

Although the Garo community has a higher literacy rate among women compared to other indigenous groups, socio-cultural tensions exist. Many young Garo women drop out of school due to financial constraints, family responsibilities, or early marriage (Ralte, 2018). The expectation that women should prioritize household duties over career aspirations remains a significant barrier to gender equality. Despite their matrilineal status, Garo women are not immune to gender-based violence and domestic abuse. Studies indicate that cases of domestic violence and marital conflicts are rising, particularly among families experiencing economic stress or cultural shifts (Sangma, 1987). In many instances, women hesitate to report abuse due to social stigma and family pressure, reflecting broader challenges in addressing gender-based violence within indigenous communities (Bal, 2017).

Another gap in Garo women's empowerment is the fact that their representation in formal political institutions remains low. The lack of female political leaders within local governance and national-level politics limits their ability to advocate for policies that address women's rights, land ownership, and social protection. Legal frameworks often fail to recognize indigenous women's unique challenges, leaving them vulnerable to land dispossession, economic exploitation, and discrimination.

Conclusion

The Garo ethnic group in Bangladesh offers a distinctive viewpoint on gender equality, shaped by the interaction of shifting socioeconomic realities, religious influences, and matrilineal social structures. In Garo society, matriliny guarantees women a degree of social and economic security that is unusual in many patriarchal South Asian environments. By placing women at the center of kinship and inheritance, indigenous beliefs have historically ingrained gender equality into the community's cultural identity, which is unusual in many patriarchal South Asian environments, as well as the ability to inherit property and wield responsibility in family decision-making. In this way, indigenous beliefs have historically supported these traditions and ingrained gender equality into cultural identity.

By establishing educational institutions, encouraging literacy, and opening doors for women to hold leadership positions in community and church-based groups, the growth of Christianity during the colonial and postcolonial eras significantly influenced gender relations. These advancements have increased

women's agency by allowing them to work in occupations like teaching, healthcare, and social activism as well as to participate in decisions made in the home and community.

However, the effects of Christianity have been multifaceted. Church leadership structures frequently continue to be male dominated, restricting women's participation in religious decision-making even as they promote empowerment via education and social mobility. Traditional female-centered authority has also been challenged by modernization, urbanization, and exposure to patriarchal values from mainstream Bangladeshi society. Early marriage, workplace discrimination, economic trends toward male-dominated industries, and a lack of political representation all impede women's ability to fully exercise their agency.

In spite of these obstacles, the Garo community shows tenacity by utilizing indigenous customs and religious beliefs as cultural tools to maintain women's authority and negotiate gender roles. Applying Kabeer's (1999) paradigm of resources, agency, and achievements reveals that gender equality among the Garo is maintained as a dynamic, negotiated process rather than a static state. The community demonstrates remarkable tenacity by utilizing both indigenous customs and Christian teachings as cultural resources for resilience. To achieve sustainable gender equality, policy interventions must move beyond a "one-size-fits-all" approach and instead acknowledge matrilineal history, encourage inclusive religious leadership, and legally protect women's inheritance rights. Ultimately, the Garo experience highlights how the interplay of belief and identity can serve as a vital resource for maintaining women's empowerment in a rapidly changing sociocultural landscape.

Policy interventions should acknowledge matrilineal history, encourage inclusive leadership in religious organizations, provide access to economic and educational possibilities, and guarantee the legal protection of women's land rights and inheritance in order to achieve sustainable gender equality. Future studies can look at how Christianity has affected gender norms over time, how industrialization has affected matrilineal authority, and how to strike a balance between gender-inclusive policy and traditional preservation. Gaining an understanding of the Garo experience can help one better understand how social customs, identity, and belief systems influence gender equality in indigenous societies. It also highlights the benefits and difficulties of maintaining women's empowerment in a sociocultural setting that is changing quickly.

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