
Women and Informal Politics, A study of Mizo Women's Organisation [Mizo Hmeichhe Insuihkawm Pawl]

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Abstract: *Using the Mizo Hmeichhe Insuihkawm Pawl [MHIP] or Mizo Women's Organization as a case study, this paper explores whether women's participation in informal politics leads to women's empowerment. Since the birth of the MHIP in 1972, the organization adopted various strategies, to try to improve the status for women in society. The MHIP has also tried to modify different Mizo Customary laws that disadvantage women in marriage, divorce, and inheritance. Beginning in 1980, they submitted several recommendations to the government. Focusing on the economic, social, and political development of women, the MHIP declared each year as 'Women's year' for the last 12 years (1997-2011). Although the MHIP has addressed the social and economic status of women, worked to improve women's status in the public sphere, and sought changes in Mizo Customary law, they have not challenged basic definitions of women's roles and the gendered division of work attached to these roles. This article adopts qualitative approach to understand the various strategies adopted by MHIP to improve women's status, it attempts to explore the issues MHIP addressed as well as their conception of women's essential nature and proper role in society. Data were collected over a period of six month during January 2019 to June 2019, from the record of MHIP General Assembly minute book from 2009- 2015. My observation is that the MHIP's efforts to improve the status of women without challenging the gendered division of labour and access to resources is unlikely to lead to empowerment for women*

Keywords: *Mizo women's organisation, Empowerment, Culture, Moral values*

1. Introduction

Historically, the Mizo tribe was part of a great Mongoloid, recognised as migrated from China and then settled in an area that extended from western Burma and eastern Bangladesh to the North East India. The generic term 'Mizo' includes various tribes or clans who inhabit the region and share similar religion as Christian and the traditional political system of the Mizos was hereditary chieftainship. The region now known as Mizoram, formerly called the 'Lushai Hills,' was occupied by the British from 1895 and placed under the Assam administration from April 1, 1898. Welsh Christian missionaries entered the Lushai Hills along with the British in 1894. The colonial officials took the role of formulating law and order while missionaries focused on reforming society through education and instilling the Christian spirit among the Mizos. Within a few decades, majority of the population became Christians. In 1928, N.E. Parry, the colonial Superintendent of the Lushai Hills compiled 'A Monograph on Lushai Customs and Ceremonies' thus the colonial administrators and village chiefs applied the laws Parry wrote about. Parry's Monograph was the first effort to write down Mizo Customary Law and it continues to be used to govern the Mizo society in all aspects of life.

After India gained Independence, the Lushai Hills Autonomous District Council was created under the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India in 1952, followed by the up-gradation of Lushai Hills to the status of the Union Territory in 1972 and finally achieved statehood in 1987.

During the pre statehood, six women became legislators by nominated and elected. The post-statehood Mizoram State Legislative Assembly has only two female legislators during the 27 years of statehood. The implementation of the Lushai Hills Autonomous District Council 1952 based on the Sixth Schedule to the constitution of India provided the Mizos with a special administrative set up to safeguard Mizo customs, culture, and religion. The signing of the Mizoram Accord 1986 preserved this regulation and stated that Mizo customary law could not be amended or modified without the approval of the legislative assembly. This meant that the Mizoram Accord protected the patriarchal construction of the Mizo customary law that largely degraded women's status in the society, effectively working against the rights of Mizo women. While there has been a growing articulations that patriarchy is less prevalent in the northeast India than the rest of mainland India and women in the northeast was considered to have gained better status in society. In actuality, there are cultural, social, and economic conditions that create barriers to women the exercise of their rights. In Mizoram, women have made considerable gains in literacy and work participation but remain under-represented in local and state politics.

The *Mizo Hmeichhe Insuihkhawm Pawl* [MHIP], the largest women organization in Mizoram was created under the department of Social Welfare. In 1973, the central government appointed the Social Welfare Advisory Board to formulate programs to address the needs of women and children; another was to promote voluntary organizations. To initiate the program, the acting Secretary in the office of the Social Welfare Board Mr. Bonthanga Punte invited all the existing women's organization leaders to unite and form a larger organization. Therefore, the various women organizations such as the *Mizo Hmeichhe Tangrual Pawl* [Mizo Women Organization], *Mizo Hmeichhe Hmasawn Pawl* [United Advanced Mizo Women], Women's Welfare Organization from two local areas of *Venghlui* and Republic in Aizawl, along with Mahila Mandal from various development block units united together to form *Mizoram Hmeichhe Insuihkhawm Pawl* [MHIP] on July 6, 1974 (Sangkhumi, 2009). The organisation was registered under the Society Act 1860 (Act XXI of 1960).

The first MHIP committee meeting held in July 20, 1974, resulted in a rulebook. According to this, any female who was 14 years of age or older could join MHIP by paying an annual membership fee of Rs 2. However, few girls' joined and most active members are married women. The MHIP General Assembly, held every two years, conducts a general election and elected official to serve for two years term. The first MHIP General Assembly, held on January 13, 1977, declared July 7 as 'MHIP Day', a date that has been observed as the official holiday in the country. The MHIP applied the picture of bamboo made weaving machine as a symbol to represent Mizo women traditional skill of weaving.

To cover all Mizo women including those who lived outside Mizoram, the MHIP replaced the word 'Mizoram' with 'Mizo'. From August 20, 1998, the organization became the *Mizo Hmeichhe Insuihkhawm Pawl* [MHIP] with it's headquarter in Aizawl (Sangkhumi, 2009). Currently, MHIP occupied sub headquarters in seven districts of Mizoram, which is furthered divided into 26 blocks and 24 Joint with 729 branches of MHIP within the entire state. The central governing body of the MHIP has nine office bearers and the office bearers then nominated 34 executive committee members. Currently, the strength of the MHIP in Mizoram is about 2.8 millions and occupied a small office in Aizawl with few members of staff including library, which is not accessible for outsider without the permission of the authority of the MHIP.

The main objective of the MHIP is to improve the status of women and children in the society. They initiated slogan as *Mite Tanpui* [Service to others] with specific attention to women and children. Their goals include the upliftment and protection of the rights of destitute and downtrodden women. The MHIP has taken steps to improve women's status, particularly focusing on Mizo Customary laws that they believed are discriminatory. The MHIP disperses money to help women and children through Charity Fund since 1987 and have generated numerous funds to help and support women who were in need. Following the general assembly in 1989, the MHIP has initiated yearly agenda to promote the social, economic, and political empowerment of women and to preserve Mizo women's traditional moral values. The MHIP founded orphanage home in 2004 with an aim of saving children's live and to care for the orphans and children in need. The government of Mizoram granted this orphanage home as Special Adoption Agencies and started operating adoption program since 2005. Initially the MHIP opposed to have any association with political party but agreed to support any political party that forms a government. This has remained a question with the current MHIP approach particularly in terms of election in leadership position.

Studying the various strategies adopted by the MHIP to improve the status of women, MHIP tries to obtain their goals by arguing women are the bearers of traditional culture. They do not challenge gender inequality in the society. Based on the decision made by the 20th General Assembly of the MHIP, the Mizoram government on September 4, 2015 issued notification to all the female employees that they must wear the traditional Mizo *puan* [Mizo women's' attire] at least twice a week (MHIP General Headquarters, 2015). The MHIP believe that requiring women to wear traditional dress to public performances is a way of reviving traditional values among Mizo women (MHIP General Headquarters, 2013). At the same time, there are no dress codes for men because when men wear western clothes, it is considered normal but Mizo women wearing western dress are seen as indecent and destructive of traditional culture. The MHIP concerned for women dress encouraged the leaders of churchwomen to spread awareness on proper dress for women. As a result, the Presbyterian Church Women's Fellowship issued a statement of an ideal dress code for women in 2015, and recommended women's dress that should be more traditional and decent dress. Churchwomen's recommendation for ideal dress code in the church wedding was making the bride's dress to be Mizo traditional dress and endorsed brides dress a combination of a clean white cotton blouse with traditional Mizo *puan* [women's attire]. They also criticised bride's dress designed with wide open neck, back, sleeveless that exposed too much of female body including extended bride's dress that has to be lifted by someone at the back. Not only for the bride, churchwomen expressed their concern for guests attended the wedding to choose appropriate dress in the church. Within the same year, MHIP leaders issued an appeal to every bridal shop in Aizawl not to design bridal gown wide-open neck and sleeveless (MHIP General Headquarters, 2015). The MHIP wanted mother to be an ideal role model of Christian mother and they wanted every mother to regard household work and the maintenance of family moral value as their responsibility. Thus, the MHIP's tools for empowering women adequately challenged the social relations that maintain gender inequality in society.

2. MHIP on women's empowerment

Women's Empowerment has become a burning issue all over the world. The first post independence projects of women development recognized the need to focus on women's unpaid work in the household while men were seen as breadwinners for the families. In the 1970s, a new approach called 'Women in Development' aimed at generating women's role in the economy. The Sixth Five Year Plan for 1980-1985 stressed the low status of women and argued the need for changes in education, health, value system, attitudes etc. (Forbes, 2012). Empowerment recognized society, not women, as the problem. After the Government of India adopted a National Policy for Empowerment in 2001, various institutions and agencies in support of empowerment were created, while the policy has facilitated new legislation to protect and improve the status of women. The Government of India 2011 Report to CEDAW showed improvement in women's literacy, education, work force participation, and political participation, as well as a decline in fertility and maternal mortality (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2011). While some improvement was noticed after the implementation of a new policy, there has been no sufficient changes in the value system, attitudes, and social structure to radically change the situation. Therefore, it is suggested that empowerment in one aspect often does not empower a woman in other aspects of her life.

Since its inception, MHIP has been devoted to the welfare and uplift of women, and has utilized every one of its general assemblies as a platform for promoting specific issues for women. The MHIP Executive Committee have proposed most of the agendas depending on what they felt was necessary and appropriate for the social circumstances. Between 1989-1991, the MHIP conducted 'Years Against Drug Abuse' and the year 1992 to 1993 was the 'Year To Be Honest,' in the work place and individual life. 1994-1995 was designated the 'Year of Obedience' for people to think about their roles and responsibilities in organizations, society, and family. 1996 to 1997 was named 'A Year Against Laziness' to inspire women to work hard at home and at work. Between 1997 and 2003, the MHIP announced 'Women's Years' with the focus of their activities creating awareness of the low status of women in society and reviewing customary laws that disadvantaged women. After the Indian government introduced 'The National Policy for Empowerment of Women' on March 20, 2001, MHIP felt the need to follow the new national policy of women's empowerment. Therefore, the MHIP identified 2003 to 2011 'Years of Women Empowerment'. During these years, they focused on the low status of women in society, the economy, and politics.

At first MHIP stressed their concern on economic empowerment, they argued that lack of recognition of women unaccounted work at home devalued women's status. They raised their concern to acknowledge younger generation to value women's crucial role at home. For women's economic empowerment, one of the major goals of MHIP was promoting women's creative skill, therefore, through financial grant received from various sources of government, the MHIP organised several training programs on making flower, jam, pickle, tailoring etc. Here, we may say that the work of making jam or flowers or doing some tailoring is seen as compatible with a woman's duties to household work and nurturing; her earnings are seen as secondary and supplemental to those of her husband. Although MHIP developed these programs as 'empowerment,' they preserve and reinforce the traditional role of women and sexual division of labour.

MHIP concern for women's political rights began in 1996 when they started to realise that the only way for women to gain legislative seats would be through nomination. But due to the division of ideas among the leaders of MHIP, they failed to make successful operation on initiating demand for reservation of women's seat in the legislative field. Because some leaders stand on the ideas that MHIP should stay away from politics and they considered that encouraging women political representation is an act of trying to involve into politics as opposed to the MHIP rulebook. Despite the differences in their approach to women in politics, they have made several attempts to encourage women in politics such as sending notice to political party leaders to offer seats for women's candidate prior to every election to the legislative assembly as well as election to the village councils. In 2008, before the election to the Mizoram Legislative Assembly, they issued a notice to all branches of MHIP by stating, 'Let us unite in support of the female candidate if the candidate is competent and qualified in her performance to the church as well as society.' Here we may note that the appeal required women candidates to have qualities, 'competent' in her duties to the church and society,' which were not a mandate of male politicians.

The MHIP campaign for female political representation during 2013 to 2015 involved raising the problem of 'unity' among themselves in the process of empowering female political participation (MHIP General Headquarters, 2013). The Assembly also identifies the need to change their attitudes on women in politics that posed a major barrier towards empowering women in politics. They recognized the importance of women supporting women. However, this is a goal to meet, even the leaders of MHIP are not in agreement about women and politics. While some leaders are committed to improving women's political participation, others see gender equality as inconsistent with Mizo tradition and their religious faith and these women argued politics is men's business.

3. MHIP on preserving women's moral values

Women have long been considered transmitters of cultural values and religious identity (Morrice, 2016). Given the fast growing pattern of modern life and the changing structure of the family, the MHIP believes the traditional family structure is most desirable. Within this, they want to reconstruct the traditional role of women combining the teaching of the Bible about women's roles to promote moral values in society. The MHIP maintains that women hold the responsibility for society's moral values and want to inspire women to be honest, hard working, and obedient to successfully perform their roles at home and in society. They also wanted a mother to inspire their daughters the sanctity of marriage according to the church law. Although the MHIP is not a religious group, every MHIP meeting, whether headquarters, branch, or local, starts with prayers and Bible verses that highlight women's responsibility for the welfare of society and home. Between 2011-2013, the MHIP held years of 'Maintaining the Mizo women's moral values.' For this, the headquarters created a booklet as an inspiration to encourage women's moral values in the society. This section will emphasize the various roles and responsibilities of women endorsed in the MHIP booklet for preserving Mizo women's moral values in the modern period.

For maintaining the ideal Christian family, the MHIP advocated proper and regular family devotion to teach children moral conduct in their daily lives. They argued that a mother had full responsibility for conducting family devotions if the father was irresponsible or exhibited poor moral conduct (MHIP General Headquarters, 2011-2013). They inspired women through the Bible

verse: 'Wives, in the same way submit yourselves to your own husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives' (1Peter 3:1-2). The MHIP saw it as a woman's duty to stay humble and committed to convincing her irresponsible husband who is the recognized head of the family. This situation reinforces the persistence belief that a husband's undesirable behavior is something women must learn to live with and gender roles that expect women to bear hardships, adjust to difficulties, remain patient, and not question her lot in life. Instead of questioning the dominant male power and authority, the MHIP criticises women who attempt to take charge of their families arguing that a woman must respect the head of the family because God approved of men's authority in the family.

To encourage women to maintain the health and hygiene of the family, the MHIP quoted the Bible verse: 'For it is written, be holy, because I am holy' (1Peter 1:16), and the common proverb: 'Cleanliness is next to godliness,' initially coined by John Wesley in 1778. To promote what they regard as the health of the family, the MHIP supported gender division of labour, the submissiveness of women, and limited mobility for females. By emphasizing the role and responsibilities of women in traditional society, supported by the teachings of the Bible, they promoted the moral virtue of the wife and mother who excelled in domestic duties manifested in her care of utensils and household goods and hard work in cooking for the family.

To maintain a healthy environment at home, the MHIP wanted every mother not to forget their primary responsibility to bring up children who would become responsible individuals in the church as well as society. They advocated that a mother must spend maximum time with her children to build a healthy family. They emphasized the role of mother in protecting children against the abuse of drugs and alcohol thus the MHIP Special Assembly 2013 called attention to mothers to put their best efforts for the safety of their children against the abuse of drugs and alcohol (MHIP General Headquarters, 2011-2013). Their suggestions for mothers include spending maximum time at home with kids and keep them busy, besides, limiting children's free time outside home where the risk of alcohol and drug abuse are high. According to the MHIP, it is the responsibility of a mother to keep children free from the abuse of drug or alcohol. This implied that a mother is expected to provide for the needs of the family and responsible for solving family issues (Mortada, 2010)

The MHIP also discussed choosing the right life partner for children and endorsed the essential role of mother's prayer in order to find the right life partner for their children (MHIP General Headquarters, 2011-2013). Admitting the degraded status of *Nu thlawi* [mother of illegitimate child] in the society, the MHIP wanted mother to put their best effort to save their daughter from pre marital sex that can accidentally bear a child without father therefore eventually becoming *nu thlawi*. The MHIP believes that a mother should have an influence choosing life partner for their children and argued that the increasing rate of divorce in the society was due parent's lack of attention towards children choice of life partner as MHIP thought parents are the best to fix the right partner for their child. Considering many challenges women faced as a single mother and divorced mother, the MHIP expects mother to educate their children the sanctity of marriage as well as the risk and the consequence of conceiving a child out of wedlock. To encourage godly marriage among children, MHIP wanted a mother to teach their children the value of obtaining godly marriage, for this, MHIP endorsed church marriage referring to the first matrimonial law of the church. For instance, according to the Presbyterian and the Baptist church of Mizoram, the first

matrimonial law implies the sanctity of both partners, free from sexual relationship before marriage and the marriage must held in the church. The MHIP believed couples acquiring marriage through the first matrimonial law of the church obtained stronger marriage bond than those married outside of the church or the second matrimonial law of the church. While the second matrimonial law of marriage implies the involvement of sex before marriage, pregnant before marriage, elopement etc. and those marriages ceremony normally held in the hall but not inside the church.

In an attempt to prevent broken marriages, the MHIP Special Assembly 2012 issued public statement-addressing women to avoid relationships with married man. To take up the issue, the MHIP headquarters insisted the leaders of every branch of MHIP to identify women involves in this type of relationship in their respective areas and initiate measures to end these kind of relationships (MHIP General Headquarters, 2012). Since this is a very personal issue, it is not known how far the MHIP actually gets involved and take actions in such matters. However, it is clear that MHIP believed they could influence the occurrence of divorce and separation by making parents to choose their children's partner. Without questioning the responsibility of men for illegitimate children, they tasked mothers with controlling their daughters' behaviour. We can argue the MHIP failed to acknowledge the role of men in impregnating women and without attention to men's behavior, it is hard to see how women alone can change society. One might suggest that the MHIP could have instead worked to change society's attitudes toward divorce and single mothers, the stigma attached to the mother of illegitimate child, and the responsibility of men towards the children they father.

The MHIP trusted that a righteous mother would teach children the right values, dress code, and influence the society in a powerful way. They wanted to reconstruct in young minds what they assumed was valued in the traditional times: honesty, bravery, and righteousness. The MHIP focused on the increasing influence of South Korean culture on young people, blaming an increase in homosexuality on Korean films. The MHIP felt media and the Internet influence young people to imitate the western life style in undesirable ways (MHIP General Headquarters, 2011-2013). To prevent this, mothers were asked to control their children's experience of media. In the earlier period, the MHIP has tried to control women's dress code to protect women from sexual abuse. Here, the MHIP's focus shifted to the dress of young people, which they perceived as inappropriate with a Christian culture. The MHIP asked mothers to prevent their daughters wearing revealing clothing, short pants, and sleeveless tops, which they perceived as immoral and unchristian. The MHIP vetted appropriate dress for married women that were smart, simple, and decent. Quoting a Bible verse: 'I also want the women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, adorning themselves, not with elaborate hairstyles or gold or pearls or expensive clothes,' (Timothy 2:9-10) they argued married women should not wear trousers, fancy dress, certain hairstyles, or excessive makeup because these were considered improper for Christian mothers. The MHIP endorsed the traditional Mizo *puan* [wraparound skirt] the best dress for a married woman and insisted married women wear it to public events. While men could wear western dress and still be considered Mizo, the MHIP regarded women wearing western dress as immoral and abandoning their role as bearers of tradition (Louise and Roces, 2004). In an attempt to revive traditional Mizo attire, the MHIP General Assembly 2015, asked the government to make the *puan* compulsory dress for female government employees. Therefore, on September 4, 2015, the Mizoram government issued notification that states, 'With a sincere attempt to revive the Mizo traditional women's attire in the MHIP General Assembly of 2015, the Mizoram government notify its female employee to wear the

Mizo traditional ‘puan’ at least twice a week.’ However, there was no instruction on the clothing to be worn by Mizo men. The same year, under the influence of MHIP, the Presbyterian Churchwomen issued notification regarding the dress code for church and for weddings as a way of promoting the Mizo *puan* and limiting what they considered ‘indecent dress.’ The MHIP regards traditional dress as a way of preserving traditional culture and ensuring adherence to a moral code they endorsed.

4. Conclusion

Like any other women’s organization, the MHIP’s focus progressively shifted from social and economic rights to political rights (Murtagh, 2008). The MHIP efforts to empower women economically appear to be an attempt to encourage women’s domestic skills: making pickles, jam, tailoring etc., that might be used to earn a living. Although, MHIP recognized the need for women’s economic empowerment, their programs for empowering women economically have generally reinforced gender roles and responsibilities. While some MHIP leaders and members have wanted to empower women politically, they are concerned that women candidates are respectable members of their churches and communities. They have not been able to agree on the value of women’s political participation or even if women should engage in politics. It seems clear that social structures need to change in order to have common ideas on supporting women’s political participation. MHIP efforts might be more effective if they focused on transforming attitudes and values, however, it is clear they do not agree on women’s role in society. In the end, MHIP has tried to “empower” women without challenging the status quo and their tools for empowerment reinforce the traditional notions of female role and responsibilities. Therefore, we may argue that although MHIP claim a commitment to ‘empowerment,’ they are not truly committed to the process of giving women the tools and opportunities to become stronger and more confident so they can exercise more control over their lives and claim their rights. The MHIP failed to acknowledge that women political empowerment could be achieved not by inviting women to elect women’s candidates but by addressing the issue of women’s underrepresentation in politics as a result of the social and cultural inequalities in the society.

In an attempt to preserve the Mizo women's moral values, the MHIP imposed on women the role of bearer of traditional culture and Christian moral values. Instead of challenging the gendered division of labour in the household, women were encouraged to put their best efforts into their domestic duties. The MHIP strongly supported wearing Mizo traditional *puan* as a way of preserving the Mizo traditional values and preserving good moral conduct. They regarded married women dressing in modern dress and wearing makeup as immoral. By making women ‘the guardian of culture’ (Thein, 2015 and Keane, 2012), the MHIP tried to resolve everyday problems for making a better society and families. In an attempt to promote women’s moral values, the MHIP consider women central to cultural reconstruction and religious morality. They have recommended full submission and dedication of the mothers to domestic responsibilities, the care of family, and instilling virtue in children. The MHIP advocated that women must lead their lives based on the expectation of the society and hence function as bearers of moral values. It may be argued that the MHIP’s concerns have been focused on women’s practical needs without any fundamental changes to the existing society’s construction of gender. Thus, they end up reproducing gender inequalities by reinforcing gender stereotypes (Mudege and Kwangwari, 2013). Without challenging society’s

attitudes and perception on gender, the MHIP members will not realize the value of empowering women.

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