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Her Land and Rights for Raising Her Voices: A Phenomenology-Based Ethnography on Contemporary Garo Women

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Article Info	Abstract
<p><i>Article History</i></p> <p>Date of Submission 30-09-2025</p> <p>Date of Acceptance 29-10-2025</p> <p>Date of Publication 30-12-2025</p>	<p>Among the Garo ethnic groups, the youngest daughter inherit property and land from their mother. In the traditional Garo society, men do not inherit any property. However, as per the mother's clan, the mother has the right over the children, and receive the name of her clan or Mahari. Property ownership helps a woman to understand and pursue all phenomena related to the power and authority vested, and strives to express the mentality. She tries to express it through her physical expression, behavioral expression, and use of language, choice of words, authoritative behavior, and commanding voices. This research has used the phenomenology-based ethnography method to collect qualitative data. The purpose of conducting the study is to determine the compatibility between her land ownership and raising voices in regards to her personal interest, family interest as well as social interest, to understand the freedom of speech of women as well as men in Garo society.</p>
<p><i>Keywords</i></p> <p>Land Rights, Authority, Empowerment, Power, Gestures</p>	

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Introduction

According to the Garo customs, the Mahari (a collective unit of a clan) is the de jure owner of the property, but the de facto ownership and authority flows continuously through the mother's line. Undoubtedly, the property ownership can empower the Garo women in economic, social and psychological aspects of their respective family. It is factual that this sort of psychological state can enhance to raise her voice in terms of conversation, in terms of language use, in terms of gesture, but the reality is that they do not have the equal authority over their social sphere. This intangible cultural heritage of Garo ethnic community can surprise any researcher. However, although there are quite a few socio-anthropological-linguistic studies on the Garo society. This study has reviewed different articles and research works, which have been conducted on Garo women along with Khasia and Jaintia ethnic groups living in both Bangladesh and Indian part. Among these Rashid et al. (2022); The Daily Sun (published on May 31, 2019); Kharkongor (2024); Bhowmick and Sangma (2025); Das and Mohanty (2016); Nokrek and Ahmed (2022) and many others. As there are, no any significant research work on the process and expression of women's empowerment around property ownership. Therefore, this study has intended to fill the knowledge gap and bridging the gap by collecting information on the phenomenon under study. The importance of such study is immense, because it helps to identify the issues as important for social scientists. To grasp grass-root level perceptions, conceptions, meanings of phenomena, thoughts the study has attempted to apply the phenomenology-based ethnographic method as a qualitative perspective. This method is essential in understanding lived experiences from the perspective of individuals, often using methods like in-depth interviews, conversations and participant observation.

Statement of the Research Problem

Women's voices and leadership are integral to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) because gender equality acts as a powerful catalyst and multiplier across the entire 2030 Agenda.

However, a woman's bargaining power depends on her education, career, health care, children's education, and ensuring health care. These tools will awaken the power of women to speak from their families to the wider community. Although the Goro women enjoy their rights and authority over their respective family and property, but they yet been ensured the equal rights in the society they live. The traditional Nakma system, a de facto body for social control in any Garo village, is under the control of those males who all are sons-in-law in that village. Women are free to participate in any meeting led by the Nakma, but they have to sit at a distance or behind the men in a group. If necessary, Nakma can ask for their opinions, but the authority to make decisions lies with the men. If situation demands, males consider females decision whether to be considered or not. The major phenomenon, how the women make the meaning of property, legal system, customary law, their responsibilities and duties, participation in decision-making, the nature of empowerment etc. can be an important step in any qualitative social research. That is why such phenomenology-based ethnographic study is necessary, so that through participatory observation and intensive interviewing method, the researcher can be able to delve into the society and collect the necessary information. This study has attempted to meet the pre-determined objectives.

Research Objectives

The general objective of this study is to apprehend the attitudes, perspectives, perceptions, respect and practices of Garo men and women towards their land ownership custom and gender awareness. The specific objectives are:

- 1) To know the extent of ownership on land and property that has apparently empowered Garo women, especially to apprehend the perceptions and attitude of Garo women and men;
- 2) To know how Garo women express their authority and power in their conversations with their male counterpart and female neighbors;
- 3) To know whether there is any gender-based language uses,

whether there are any restrictions or taboos imposed for women for choosing words and sentences;

- 4) To know how the young generations perceive the necessity of women empowerment and their participation in decision-making processes both in homestead and social sphere.

Literature Review

There are such studies on the issues of expression her empowerment using her voices especially among the Garo women. Marbaniang and Singh (2022) in their article have pointed out on the growing awareness of the need to empower women and achieve gender equality through the measures to achieve social, economic. Rashid et al. (2022) have aimed to explore the traditional roles of indigenous Garo women in transforming their families in Bangladesh. Dey (2015) has studied on land rights and gender issues of Garo ethnic community, her article overviews the community's changing land tenure system and traces out the difficulties the Garo, especially landless women, face in sustaining livelihoods in a degraded forest area. Hazarika (2014) she has apprehended that as the decline of shifting cultivation and advent of permanent agricultural activities demand male participation solely. There are some studies, have conducted on exclusively on women empowerment, one of the study is of Kharkongor (2024), who says that women's economic empowerment helps women to adopt various income-generating occupations, poverty alleviation, and skill development in addition to women's ownership of economic resources. There are some studies on women's voices as a metaphor for powerful speech in homestead and public sphere. Ferguson (2022) has stated that women's voice in decision-making is critical for the development of all. When women have a say in private and public affairs, decisions reflect their needs, and often the needs of their families and communities. Goetz and Musembi (n. d.) in their on-line article have stated that the Pathways of Women's Empowerment Research Programme Consortium (RPC) uses the entry point of 'Voice' in its theme 'Building Constituencies for Equality and Justice' to explore how to make institutions more accountable and responsive to women.

There are some studies on gender inequality and traditionally women's role. Sevefjord and Olsson (n. d.) have stated that there is a growing awareness of the importance of shifting the focus from the symptoms of inequality towards efforts to address the structural factors that cause it. Olsson (n. d.) has stated that gender inequalities are more commonly discussed than inequalities in general. Hossain (2017) in his paper has stated that traditionally women's role in society is limited to the private sphere in Bangladesh. Nongsiej (2018) has stated that despite the commitment from national and international corner, on gender equality and bridging the gender gap in the formal political arena women in Meghalaya are not able to get a rightful because no serious attempt were made for women's political participation. Considering the above articles and papers, this study apprehends a clear knowledge gap, as none of the study covers women empowerment through their voices and property ownership among Garo indigenous community.

Rationale of the Study

The importance of this study for social scientists or sociolinguistics is immense. Even though the context is of a small ethnic group, like the Garo, it can be possible to make decisions about women's empowerment in mainstream society. To know how women's ownership of land affects their empowerment process, intensive study needs to be conducted on Garo community in Bangladesh. Therefore, the importance of such research is immense. Such study can meet the needs of academics and researchers, and on the other hand, it can be helpful in providing information for feminists or policy makers at national and international level. Without such studies, it will not be easy to implement the government's Sustainable Development Goals or the UN's SDGs1 number 5 (gender equality) and number 10 (reducing inequality) Goals. Their social customs, intellectual knowledge can be instructive for us. Therefore, safeguarding their Cultural Heritage is a great responsibility for the mainstream society and the state as a nation. The rationale of phenomenology-based ethnographic study on her land rights and ownership pattern, her gender awareness, gender equity, gender equality and women empowerment lie in exploring

the perceptions, experiences, thoughts, and attitudinal behavioral pattern of women regarding their rights and ownership over arable and cultivable land and properties of the family.

Research Questions

In general, this study has prepared both the structured and semi-structured questionnaires before going to the study areas. Simultaneously, for informal group discussions a checklist also prepared on some supporting issues. The main issues of the questionnaires are: A questionnaire has been formulated to find out how men and women create meaning in the Garo community, how they develop their attitudes, how they develop their thoughts, how they develop a respectful mindset towards the phenomenon, and what is the mindset of men and women of different age groups on Garo traditional customs regarding different phenomenon on women's land ownership; gender awareness; rights and authority of women; gender equity and equality in the family and society; rights to raise her voices and rights to give her consent; freedom to participate in decision-making process etc.

Ethical Considerations

Code of Ethics of the American Anthropological Association (AAA)² approved on November 2012, has been followed for this study. AAA is committed to helping all anthropologists have access to quality information regarding methodological and ethical best practices. By carefully considering these ethical principles, researchers have conducted this phenomenology-based ethnographic study on women's land rights and gender awareness and her raising voices.

Research Methodology, Sampling and Study Areas

This study has followed a Phenomenology-based Ethnographic method on Garo women, her land rights, gender awareness, her empowerment, her authority and power, her ability to express by raising her voices, is a qualitative approach in social research. This

study has aimed to explore and understand the lived experience of the participants in context of women's land rights and exploring their empowerment within homestead and social sphere. To bridge the gap between the thoughts and actions of the participants, specific techniques have been followed to unearth this sort of information. This necessitates a variety of data collection methods. For the study, participants have been selected purposively, by justifying their ability to provide rich and diverse insights into the research topic. Sample sizes have been typically small, total 30 (thirty) from six dialects, five from each (3 females and 2 males), to gain a deep understanding of the phenomenon under study. The study intends to delve into the richness of information. This study has aimed to focus on the Garo ethnic community living in Bangladesh. The study has purposively selected six study areas from the districts of Tangail, Netrokona, and Sherpur, and Mymensingh, where the dialectical members are residing. The study team has stayed in six Garo villages (six dialects of Garo language) for the duration of six months, one month in one dialectical village.

Discussions of Etic Views

Women's Social Status

Garo women held a respectable position in the family and society. In Garo society, male-female relations are open, but within limits. Reviling with others by the women, usually very limited, and less used than any other societies. Society has some control over the persons to speak harshly against women in public. In Garo society, if women are being disrespected it is considered that the value of the entire family and clan has been doomed. Publicly abusing, insulting without fault, making bad proposals to women is considered as deviance as well as crime.

Women's Right over Land and Property

Women consider this traditional system as a source of empowerment. They gain economic, social and family security by owning land and property. The customary ownership pattern has empowered them with

paramount authority and customary power over land and properties including other matters of the family. It gives them respect and control in their families and communities. Women, those who own an amount of arable land take decisions for cultivation, selection of cropping patterns, budgeting, hiring of daily laborers, harvesting etc. In most cases, they also consult with their respective husband. However, it is important to note that, purchasing or selling of land, managing irrigation, sharecropping, and decisions regarding land distribution among the heirs are exclusively under the control of women, in these cases it is customary to consult with their respective Mahari. Not all women in rural areas own land. Some women own only homestead land but do not own cultivable land. In such cases, these landless women have to go outside the house to earn money. They work alongside men as daily wage laborers in agriculture. Their husbands also earn money by doing daily wage labor. They combine their earnings to support the livelihood of their families.

Women's Voices

Garos traditional society or the traditional norms inspired that women's speech should always be politeness, gentleness, submissiveness, and they have been socialized with religious teachings. In quarrel or conflicting situations, women use firmness, strong emotional reactions and use harsh language during disputes or intrusions—such as “I am not willing to talk with an evil-natured person like you,” or “I will not listen to you.” In traditional Garo society, women are expected to use their language, gestures with “humility”. Although women are humble in attitude due to structural inequality and dependency, but they can raise their voices or speak firmly in times of need and pressure—especially with family or neighbors. During a quarrel, women are seen to shake their hands vigorously, raising eyes in anger or turning into grimace. According to the Garo people, women are peace loving and there are many restrictions on the use of language from a religious point of view. Women are seen using some female-related terms during quarrels among themselves, such as prostitute or slut, (Fallali Changa, Namja Michiks) etc. Traditionally, Garo women are affording shelter and hospitality to guests, strangers and kin, they

do not engage in social conflict. Usually, they paid importance to both family and community members, because the expectation is that the woman would establish herself as a respectable person. Due to social and cultural changes in Garo society, the traditional expectations are gradually decreasing. Increasing trends of rural-urban migration are pushing or pulling the young generations to the urban-based life-style. These urban-based women are more prone to self-reliance; self-centered; self-empowered; self-dependent; possess freedom of speech; individual freedom; freedom of expression etc.

Relevance of Sociological Theories

Structural Functionalism

Structural functionalism discusses gender as a key driving force in maintaining social stability. According to his view, women have to play expressive roles in the family, especially caring for and providing security to children, and providing emotional support for the family members. In short, women's role in the family is to manage the family and raise the children, while men are to provide economic security to the family.

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism focuses on how society teaches that daughters will inherit their mother's property and land. After marriage, a man has to go to his wife's house elsewhere, he has no property ownership, and even since he has no ownership over his children, if his wife dies before him, the family can force that husband to leave the family, but only if his daughters want to keep him, he can remain as a dependent. This kind of social division is taught by society through various ideals, social customs, and policies, and everyone.

Feminist Theory

Feminist theory raises various issues regarding social and historical inequalities between the genders. It raises other regressive issues such as race, class, and sexual oppression. Feminist theory is not directly applicable in Garo society, yet it can be said that there are some

things in Garo society that undermine women's rights in the social sphere, in the sphere of exercising power, and in the sphere of politics. Although women are powerful in the family, their position in society is discriminatory.

Relevance of Linguistic Theories

Dominance Theory

According to this theory, in Garo traditional society, women's conversation is expected to be polite and respectful in the use of language and the words they use. As a result, linguistically, men's influence over women is observed in Garo society. The society also expects politeness in the language that women use as a tool to exercise their power and authority through land-based empowerment. However, like men, women also use many abusive words in practical.

Deficiency Theory

A male-centric dimension characterizes the use of language in Garo society. Although women have power and authority in the Garo family, the dominance of men is noticeable in the larger Garo society. The Garo clan elects a man as its head (Nakma), where all the members are men. In such male-dominated organizations, women's speech is considered unnecessary.

Feminist Linguistics

It can be argued in a feminist voice that women's participation in public gatherings in Garo society should be given the opportunity to use language with dignity and respect, not in a male-centric manner. If women's participation in the decision-making process in society can be ensured, Garo society can actually achieve full empowerment of women.

Linguistic Relativity (Whorfian Hypothesis)

Whorfian Hypothesis is based on phenomenological concept. This theory is true in the case of Garo society, because language determines the thinking and mentality of people. Since code-mixing of Bengali

and English (for those who know this language) with their own language is widely practiced in Garo society. Many Garo families have conversations completely in Bengali or English.

Difference (or Cultural) Model

This theory argues that men and women communicate differently due to gender socialization, not because of inferiority or influence. In fact, in Garo society, phenomenological differences can be observed between women and men regarding a different phenomenon due to the influence of socialization rather than usage of language.

Gender Socialization Models

In Garo society, members of Generation G and Generation Alpha are determined to break all the stereotypes in the society. They want to change the various customs that have been passed down from generation to generation in Garo society which create gender inequality in their society, and return to traditional religion Sangsarek, some want to break the flow of social change and revive traditional culture and language. They want to protest against all stereotypes, being highly influenced by their peers. Therefore, this model is very practical for the new generations of Garo society.

Results and Findings of the Study – Observational Reality

In Garo society, the status of women is socially recognized. Her lineage, the Mahari system, is around her. In Garo society, the youngest daughter inherits property from her mother, and all children inherit their lineage or clan identity from the mother. This traditional customs have given uniqueness to the Garo society on the one hand, and on the other hand, by giving land ownership to women, it has made women self-reliant, independent, and proud landowners. After obtaining ownership, the woman is fully aware of her own property and ownership, she can properly apprehend its meaning. The woman perceives a visible and invisible difference between her as the owner of the land and her husband who does not own the land. The idea of owning arable and homestead land gives her an identity as she held the power

and authority in the family and society. She understands that she is at the center of empowerment circle. Since she is the head of the family by customary law, she enjoys complete freedom in the major matters of the family, especially in economic matters, land use, cultivation, harvesting, making decisions on the expenditures, controlling over the family income, or in rearing children, educating them, marrying them off, etc. However, for family peace or for better advice, woman consults her husband on these matters. This is entirely her self-matter, not an imposed decision. How much the husband will be valued in the family depends mainly on the wife's will or unwillingness. Usually, the man emerges as the caretaker of the family and the properties in his wife's family. In some cases, this responsibility empowers or makes him independent. As a result, the husband is a property less, landless, helpless person, whom the wife can throw out or drive out of the house for any reason. Compared to landless women in the society, women who own land develop a distinct mentality. They consider themselves richer and more empowered than those women. Women in the society who do not own land, or who do not own land through Mahari, or who have become landless in any way, lack power and authority; she is not empowered by inheriting the land. However, since they are in Mahari, a sense of security works among them. These women cannot enter the center of empowerment in the family or in the society. Their body language also shows an absence of power. Females of these families are working with their males as daily labors. In these families, both husband and wife and even adult children have to engage in physical labor to earn a living. Young men and women from these families who have received primary or secondary education are migrating to Dhaka city and choosing various professions. The poor boys and girls of these urban-based families are finding work in shopping malls, beauty parlors, and security guards; boys in diplomatic neighborhoods are working as security guards; girls are working as housekeepers. They are sending a part of their earned money to their parents or spending it in the village. A new urban-based capitalist atmosphere is entering in the land-based Garo society, where the importance of land ownership is decreasing due to various urban-based manual labor occupations

and the availability of cash from such occupations and income. With the breakdown of the traditional land-centered social system, the circle of empowerment that was created around land-centered ownership is gradually diminishing.

Recommendations

In Garo society, property ownership has not only given women the freedom to speak their own thoughts but has also placed them in a respectable position in society, but to maintain some gender balance, society has given women authority over their family and given men social authority. As a result, the possibility of gender inequality is almost non-existent here. Rather, we can say that an attempt has been made to maintain a visible equilibrium of empowerment in Garo society. However, if women's participation can be ensured in social meetings and gatherings and if women's participation in the decision-making process can be ensured, it seems that an extreme example of women's empowerment will be observed in Garo society.

Conclusion

Garo and Khasia women are in a special position of empowerment compared to other ethnic minority groups living in Bangladesh, because women of these ethnic minority groups inherit the right to ownership over land and all property. As a result, Garo women are given the opportunity to exercise authority and power over their society and family, as recognized by society, and women have freedom of movement in their social sphere. However, the problem is that the opportunity for Bengalis to enter and settle in Garo villages limits their movement. Even when they go out of the house, the dominance of Bengalis is hindering the traditional sphere of empowerment of these women. They are also restricted in using their own language, because, in cases where these women have Bengali neighbors, they have to communicate in Bangla, so they are also restricted from expressing their thoughts in their own language. The exercise of women's power in Garo society is a symbol of tradition, which is equally respected by both Garo men and women. After the observation, this study admits

some limitations and research gaps. It is true that this study has been conducted only in the current context of the Garo rural society, so the observation has naturally revealed the current socio-economic life of women in the rural context. However, it was not possible to make a comparative discussion in the context of urban educated or employed young women. This limitation is very natural for the purpose of this research. Through such a comparative study, it will be possible to discuss the impact of education and profession as well as tradition on the lives of Garo women. This study believes that if any social researcher conducts such an initiative in the future, we will certainly get a comprehensive research report.

Note

1. What are the Sustainable Development Goals? The SDGS in action, United Nations Development Programme, <https://www.undp.org/sustainable-development-goals>.
2. Anthropological Ethics, <https://americananthro.org/wp-content/uploads/aaa-code-of-ethics-2012.pdf>

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