

Women Entrepreneurs in IMA Market, Manipur: Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract: This research paper "Women Entrepreneurs in Ima Market, Manipur: Challenges and Opportunities" addresses the elements of female entrepreneurship in the distinctive setting of the Ima Market in Manipur, India. Khwairamband Bazar, popularly known as the "Ima Keithel" among the Manipuris is a thriving symbol of women's economic emancipation and cultural legacy in Manipur. Through a qualitative analysis, this research paper provides insights into the complexities faced by women entrepreneurs in this market, including Gender biases and deeply rooted sociocultural norms, structural limitations, unstable environment, limited access to capital. Despite these challenges, the Ima Market also presents various opportunities for women, such as fostering a sense of community, preserving cultural heritage, and enabling economic empowerment. By understanding both the challenges and opportunities, policymakers and stakeholders can develop targeted interventions to support and enhance the role of women entrepreneurs in the Ima Market, thereby contributing to broader socio-economic development in Manipur.

Keywords: Ima Market, women entrepreneurs, economic emancipation, gender biases, socio-cultural norms, structural limitations, unstable environment, limited access to capital, cultural heritage.

Introduction

Ima Keithel, also called Ima Market, is a major cultural, social, and financial hub in the Indian state of Manipur, which is located in the northeast. "Ima" signifies "mother" in Manipuri, and the market carries this name aptly since it is one of the biggest and oldest markets in the world that is run exclusively by women. Located in the centre of Imphal, the capital city of Manipur, Ima Keithel, has a rich historical legacy that is embedded in the local way of life. The market, which is primarily handled by women, is a real example of Manipuri society's entrepreneurial drive and matriarchal customs. Ima Market has been believed to have its roots in the time of Maharaja Pakhangba, the mythical ruler of Manipur. According to historical records, women in Manipur were important players in trade and commerce in addition to their residence concerns. As expert makers, traders, and preservers of conventional understanding, they made significant contributions to the regional economy and overall welfare of society. Ima Market evolved over generations from a small commerce post to a flourishing centre of business, mirroring the shifting social dynamics of Manipuri culture. The market's strategic location in Imphal enhanced its value and diversity by promoting trade and cultural exchange with nearby regions. In Manipur today, Ima Market represents the empowerment of women, economic independence, and communal unity. It continues to attract tourists from all over the world, drawn by its rich history and cultural significance in addition to its lively atmosphere and vast selection of goods. Ima Market has had plenty of challenges over the last few decades, such as poor infrastructure, competition from newer businesses, and sociopolitical change in the area. Nonetheless, Ima Market's women have proven their determination by adjusting to shifting conditions, creating fresh approaches to commerce, and safeguarding their cultural legacy.

Importance of Ima Market: Understanding women's entrepreneurship in the particular setting of Ima Market reveals a complex web created with elements of equal opportunity, creativity, inspiration, unity in community, economic empowerment, socio-cultural relevance, and policy consequences. This research explores the various aspects of women's entrepreneurship in the Ima Market and highlights how it may change people's lives as well as communities and society as a whole. Ima Market is a live portrayal of Manipuri culture, customs, and social

norms rather than merely a market area. As "Ima," or mothers, women define the economy, a reflection of the strong matriarchal culture that defines Manipuri society. Understanding women's entrepreneurship in the cultural context helps to clarify the complex interactions that exist between gender roles, cultural expectations, and economic autonomy. It clarifies the difficulties and chances that women encounter while balancing their desire for entrepreneurship with traditional responsibilities, providing guidance on how to achieve equal opportunities for women and societal change. The transforming potential of economic empowerment is at the foundation of women's entrepreneurship in Ima Market. Women who pursue entrepreneurship become financially independent, improve their socioeconomic standing, and increase the amount of money that comes into the home. Beyond personal gains, women's economic empowerment includes more general development objectives, such as reducing poverty and promoting inclusive growth and community prosperity. Researchers may understand the processes by which women's entrepreneurship promotes economic empowerment, sustainable livelihoods, and socio-economic development in Manipur through the perspective of Ima Market. Ima Market preserves the generations-old textiles and clothing, cuisine customs, and handicrafts that have been passed down through the Manipuri community. In the marketplace, women entrepreneurs are vital to maintaining and developing indigenous knowledge, handicrafts, and cultural identity. Examining women's entrepreneurship within this particular cultural setting highlights the need of cultural preservation as a fundamental element of economic efforts. It highlights the mutually beneficial relationship between cultural heritage and entrepreneurial pursuits, enhancing Manipur's cultural foundation and promoting pride and determination among its people. There's a strong sense of solidarity among the people at Ima Market's crowded lanes. Strong social networks defined by cooperation, support, and group efforts are created by female entrepreneurs. These networks function as forums for solidarity, social contact, and information sharing in addition to commercial exchanges. Studying women's entrepreneurship in Ima Market reveals the social factors that support homogeneity among communities and highlights the role that women play as agents for social change and social progress. Future generations of women who aspire to become entrepreneurs can draw inspiration from the experiences of the female entrepreneurs in Ima Market. Their stories of determination, hard work, and achievement clarify misconceptions, encourage would-be business owners, and expand the opportunities available to women in Manipur and beyond. Examining their paths and experiences gives them a greater voice, recognizes their accomplishments, and encourages others to follow their own entrepreneurial aspirations. Studies can encourage a culture of entrepreneurship, creativity, and leadership among women and drive social and economic change by highlighting the transformative impact of women's entrepreneurship. Ima Market offers an environment for studying gender relations and advocating for equal opportunity in the business world. Researchers can find barriers to women's economic engagement, push for modifications to the law, and support efforts that are inclusive of both genders by examining women entrepreneurs. In addition to challenging traditional gender norms, the empowerment of women entrepreneurs at Ima Market supports more general objectives of fairness, equality, and rights for all. It emphasizes how critical it is to address widespread inequalities and establish conditions that support women's economic empowerment as well as participation in making choices.

Demographic characteristics of women entrepreneurs:

The women entrepreneurs of Ima Market form a vibrant and diverse community. This research examines their socio-economic characteristics, including age, family background, educational qualifications, economic status, types of businesses, business practices, and the scale of these enterprises. Female entrepreneurs at Ima Market span a wide age range, highlighting the market's multigenerational nature. Women in their twenties and those in their sixties and beyond work side by side, combining a wealth of experience with youthful energy. This diverse age range benefits the market by facilitating the transfer of traditional knowledge and business skills to younger generations. Also, the educational backgrounds of women entrepreneurs in Ima Market vary widely. Some women possess formal education, while others rely on traditional knowledge and skills passed down through generations. Despite differing levels of formal education, all women entrepreneurs at Ima Market share a common resilience and entrepreneurial spirit that drives their business ventures. Regarding economic status, women entrepreneurs at Ima Market come from various economic backgrounds. While some belong to economically stable families, others have ventured into entrepreneurship as a means of economic survival and upward mobility. Regardless of their initial economic status, the market provides them with opportunities to improve their financial standing and achieve economic independence. The businesses at Ima Market are diverse, ranging from the sale of traditional

handicrafts, textiles, and garments to fresh produce, spices, and local delicacies. Some women also engage in providing services such as tailoring, beauty treatments, and food catering. This diversity of businesses reflects the market's dynamic nature and the adaptability of its women entrepreneurs. Business practices at Ima Market are deeply rooted in traditional methods, yet many women have also adopted modern techniques to enhance their enterprises. The scale of businesses varies, with some women operating small stalls while others manage larger shops with a broader range of products. Despite the differences in scale, all women entrepreneurs at Ima Market share a commitment to maintaining the market's vibrant and inclusive atmosphere.

Challenges and Opportunities:

Challenges: At Ima Market, a major obstacle for many female entrepreneurs is access to capital. Due to the strict conditions that traditional financial institutions frequently impose, many women are forced to rely on unofficial lending methods or microfinance programs. Their inability to invest in new technology, grow their enterprises, and become more competitive overall is hindered by their lack of financial resources. For female entrepreneurs, societal views and deeply rooted gender biases provide significant barriers. Women still encounter sexism and discrimination from some societal groups who prioritize their household responsibilities over their business pursuits, despite the market's matriarchal structure. These social perceptions restrict women's options and put more obstacles on their path as entrepreneurs. Inadequate infrastructure is another challenge that women entrepreneurs at Ima Market contend with. Poor road conditions, limited access to reliable utilities, and insufficient market facilities affect their business operations and customer accessibility. Infrastructure improvements are essential to enhance the market's functionality and support the growth of women's businesses. Complicated and unclear regulatory environments present more challenges for female enterprises. It can be difficult and time-consuming to navigate bureaucratic procedures, secure required permits, and adhere to regulatory standards. Ima Market may better help women in the workforce by streamlining these procedures and implementing encouraging policies.

Opportunities: Despite the challenges, Ima Market presents several opportunities for women entrepreneurs to thrive and achieve economic empowerment: The strong sense of community and solidarity among women at Ima Market is a significant source of support. Women entrepreneurs form networks and alliances that provide mutual assistance, share knowledge, and collaborate on business ventures. These social networks foster a sense of belonging and resilience, helping women navigate challenges and capitalize on opportunities. Also, women entrepreneurs at Ima Market play a vital role in preserving and promoting Manipur's rich cultural heritage. By engaging in traditional crafts, textiles, and culinary practices, they help sustain indigenous knowledge and cultural identity. This cultural preservation not only adds value to their businesses but also attracts tourists and customers who seek authentic and culturally significant products. Entrepreneurship at Ima Market also offers women a pathway to economic empowerment and upward mobility. By establishing and growing their businesses, women can achieve financial independence, improve their socio-economic status, and contribute to their families' well-being. This economic empowerment has ripple effects on the broader community, fostering inclusive growth and development.

Strategies for overcoming challenges: Improving access to capital is crucial for the growth and sustainability of women-owned businesses at Ima Market. Financial institutions should develop inclusive lending practices that consider the unique needs and constraints of women entrepreneurs. Microfinance programs, government grants, and low-interest loans can provide much-needed financial support. Additionally, enhancing financial literacy and management skills can empower women to make informed financial decisions and effectively manage their businesses. Advocacy and awareness campaigns are essential to challenge societal attitudes and gender biases that hinder women's entrepreneurial endeavours. Promoting positive narratives about women entrepreneurs, showcasing their success stories, and highlighting their contributions to the economy can change perceptions and inspire more women to pursue entrepreneurship. Engaging community leaders, policymakers, and media can amplify these efforts and create a more supportive environment for women at Ima Market. Investing in infrastructure development is vital to enhance the market's functionality and accessibility. Improving road conditions, ensuring reliable access to utilities, and upgrading market facilities can create a more conducive environment for business operations. Infrastructure development not only benefits women entrepreneurs but also

attracts more customers and boosts the overall economic activity at Ima Market. Simplifying regulatory processes and creating supportive policies can reduce bureaucratic barriers for women entrepreneurs. Streamlined procedures for obtaining permits, licenses, and approvals can save time and resources, allowing women to focus on growing their businesses. Establishing one-stop centres or digital platforms for regulatory services can further enhance efficiency and accessibility. Creating networking and collaboration opportunities can strengthen the social capital of women entrepreneurs at Ima Market. Facilitating connections with other entrepreneurs, business associations, and industry stakeholders can open avenues for partnerships, market access, and knowledge exchange. Networking events, trade fairs, and online platforms can foster collaboration and create a sense of community among women entrepreneurs.

Conclusion: Improving opportunities for networking and collaboration can greatly increase the social capital of female entrepreneurs at Ima Market. Making connections with other business owners, trade associations, and industry players can open up new doors for collaboration, access to markets, and knowledge sharing. To increase their businesses, influence and reach, these exchanges are crucial. Online resources, trade shows, and networking events are essential for fostering these relationships. These events give female entrepreneurs the ability to network with colleagues, business leaders, and possible partnerships. These kinds of interactions foster the development of a helpful community in addition to offering priceless insights and resources. Also, specifically, trade shows offer a vibrant venue for female entrepreneurs to exhibit their goods, reach out to new customers, and discover the newest developments in the business world. These gatherings frequently draw a wide range of attendees, such as investors, suppliers, and customers, offering several chances for cooperation and business growth. The importance of online platforms has grown in the current digital era. They provide a practical and effective means for female entrepreneurs to network, exchange stories, and work together on initiatives. Regardless of geographic boundaries, social media groups, professional networks, and specialized forums can help women entrepreneurs continue to communicate and support one another. Furthermore, it's critical to use these networking opportunities to foster a feeling of community. A strong peer network may share experiences and difficulties, offer practical guidance, and offer emotional support. This sense of community can encourage female company owners, increase their self-assurance, and motivate them to work harder toward their objectives. Women business owners can benefit from each other's resources and strengths when they work together. Collaboration can result in mutual benefits through joint enterprises, co-branding projects, and collaborative marketing campaigns, to name a few. These alliances have the potential to expand their consumer base, raise overall profitability, and improve their companies' reputation and visibility. All things considered, encouraging networking and teamwork among female business owners at Ima Market is an effective tactic for boosting their social capital and commercial opportunities. It establishes an environment that is favourable to women's growth, innovation, and economic empowerment. Women entrepreneurs may support the larger objectives of inclusive growth and socioeconomic development in Manipur by working together on these initiatives.

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