

“Impact of Patriarchal Customs on Women’s Land Ownership Among Galo Tribe in West Siang District of Arunachal Pradesh”

Abstract

This study explored how patriarchal customs influence women’s land ownership and inheritance among the Galo tribe in West Siang, Arunachal Pradesh. Land in Galo society is more than just an economic asset; it represents lineage, identity, and belonging. Yet, the prevailing patrilineal inheritance and patrilocal residence systems place land rights squarely in male hands, effectively excluding daughters from inheritance.

Using a mixed-method approach, data from around 150 adult respondents and interviews with women, elders, and leaders revealed that none of the women inherited ancestral land. Only a small portion (2%) received land as parental gifts, typically newly acquired land rather than ancestral property, while the overwhelming majority (98%) purchased land themselves. This shows not only how customary norms exclude women but also how determined women are to secure economic independence despite systemic barriers.

Decision-making remains dominated by male elders in the customary village council (keba), reinforcing the exclusion of women. Although legal provisions exist to guarantee equal inheritance rights, these rights remain mostly theoretical, overshadowed by the prevailing customary system.

The women interviewed expressed a range of emotions—from acceptance to frustration, hope, and agency. While many accept cultural norms, they also assert themselves by purchasing land, which is a source of economic security and empowerment, though often lacking full social legitimacy. Factors such as education, financial independence, and NGO support help women acquire land, but deeply rooted patriarchal attitudes, low awareness of legal rights, and fear of community backlash continue to hinder progress.

Thus achieving gender equality in land ownership among the Galo requires a multifaceted approach. Legal literacy, economic empowerment, engaging with customary leaders, and promoting women’s inclusion in formal land registration processes are essential steps forward. While Galo women demonstrate resilience and adaptability, true equality will only arrive when customs evolve to fully recognize women as rightful heirs. This study adds vital empirical evidence and personal voices to the ongoing dialogue on balancing tradition with gender justice in tribal communities.

Keywords: *Patriarchy, Customary Law, Women’s Land Rights, Galo Tribe, Arunachal Pradesh*

INTRODUCTION

Tribal societies across India are sustained by deep-rooted traditions and indigenous systems of governance that regulate community life, property relations, and social norms. In these contexts, land is not merely an economic asset but a profound marker of heritage, identity, and security. Within the Galo tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, primarily settled in the West Siang district, customary laws and cultural codes continue to shape land ownership patterns in ways that reflect and reinforce patriarchal authority. The transmission of property through the male lineage remains the norm, symbolizing continuity of tradition but also limiting women's space within the sphere of ownership and inheritance.

This relationship between land and patriarchy is not incidental; it is embedded in a social fabric where decision-making power, lineage rights, and resource control are largely vested in men. Women's ties to land are predominantly mediated through fathers, husbands, or male relatives, making their access contingent rather than autonomous. While transformations in education and exposure to wider socio-political changes are gradually reaching tribal areas, the hold of tradition remains strong, particularly in rural Galo communities where customary codes carry binding moral authority.

Within India's broader constitutional landscape, the principle of gender equality is upheld and reinforced through several statutory provisions. Yet, tribal regions such as Arunachal Pradesh function under a unique legal pluralism in which customary laws retain legitimacy alongside state legislation. This dual structure, protected under constitutional provisions such as special autonomy articles creates a complex arena where modern laws advocating equality intersect with traditional rules rooted in patriarchal lineage systems. The outcome is an intricate balance between preserving cultural identity and reconciling it with evolving norms of justice and equity.

Studying land ownership through this lens is essential for unpacking how gender roles are defined, maintained, and contested within the Galo society. It draws attention to deeply held cultural beliefs, the mechanisms of customary governance, and the social hierarchies that influence who may inherit, control, or benefit from land. The subject also opens a window into broader questions of legal recognition, rights negotiation, and the dynamic relationship between tradition and social change in tribal India.

Guided by critical perspectives such as Feminist Legal Theory and the Gender and Development (GAD) framework, this inquiry situates itself at the intersection of culture, law, and gender relations, exploring how normative systems mediate resource distribution and power structures. By engaging

with these conceptual tools, the study approaches the Galo experience not as an isolated case but as part of a larger discourse on indigenous governance, women's rights, and the ongoing negotiation between heritage and equality.

REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

Research on tribal societies in Arunachal Pradesh and neighbouring regions shows a consistent pattern: customary norms rooted in patriarchy heavily influence women's access to land and inheritance, often limiting or denying their property rights despite statutory laws which affirm gender equality.

Chai and Choudhary (2025) examined how customary codes and gender expectations influence women's land ownership among the Galo community. Employing a mixed-method design with 300–400 participants, their findings revealed that inheritance systems rooted in patrilineal traditions severely restrict women's rights to immovable property. Despite statutory laws guaranteeing equal property rights, customary practices often supersede these formal provisions. The study highlighted that such customary dominance creates ambiguity in implementation and weakens enforcement mechanisms intended to protect women. The researchers emphasized the urgent need for policy and community-level interventions to bridge the gap between law and practice in gender equity.

Doye (2020) conducted a study among the Galo tribe of the Ramle Banggo region, focusing on inheritance practices and gender roles. The research demonstrated that customary inheritance follows a strictly male lineage, where land passes from father to son, leaving daughters with little or no ownership rights. Despite women's integral role in family and community life, they remain excluded from land decisions. Doye highlighted the role of customary leaders, such as burahs and village chiefs, in reinforcing patriarchal norms. The study concluded that even with improved education and awareness, traditional authority continues to maintain gendered land inequality.

Neba (2019) explored the inheritance system of the Tagin tribe and found that property ownership remains patrilineal, with women excluded from inheritance rights. Tagin women may use or cultivate land, but they lack formal ownership and legal authority over property. The study emphasized that despite constitutional and statutory provisions supporting gender equality, customary governance systems hold greater influence in tribal regions. These customary structures reinforce male dominance in property succession, making reform difficult. Neba concluded that without active integration of statutory law into local governance, gender equality in land ownership among tribal communities will remain aspirational.

Borang (2014) studied modernization and changing gender roles among Adi communities, emphasizing the relationship between literacy, governance participation, and shifting attitudes

toward women's property rights. The study found that while patriarchal inheritance traditions remain dominant, modernization and increased female involvement in local decision-making are fostering gradual questioning of these norms. Educational progress and exposure to external influences have initiated dialogue on gender inclusion. However, Borang noted that legal and customary reforms remain slow due to deep-rooted cultural resistance. The research underscores the tension between tradition and modernity in redefining women's roles in property ownership.

Hina (2013) investigated the inheritance customs of the Nyishi tribe and found that women are largely excluded from owning or inheriting land. Their participation in property-related decisions is minimal, reflecting the persistence of patriarchal structures. Nevertheless, Hina observed gradual change influenced by youth awareness, NGO interventions, and educational initiatives. These factors are challenging traditional gender norms and promoting discourse around women's rights and empowerment. The studies highlight a slow but meaningful transformation in attitudes toward gender and property. However, despite evolving perceptions, structural resistance and adherence to customary law still hinder equal land ownership.

Mitkong (2002) examined inheritance systems among the Adi and related tribes in Arunachal Pradesh. Their findings revealed that ancestral property is almost always inherited by male heirs, reflecting the deeply patriarchal character of customary law. However, both studies identified emerging changes driven by education, urban exposure, and economic mobility. Increased awareness of statutory laws promoting women's rights has initiated discussions about gender equity in property inheritance. While these trends suggest potential reform, both studies concluded that patriarchal norms continue to dominate, and tangible change in property ownership patterns remains limited.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- i. How do customary patriarchal traditions influence the ownership and inheritance of land among Galo women?
- ii. What tribal norms and traditional inheritance rules govern the transfer of land within Galo families?
- iii. How do married and unmarried Galo women view and experience their rights related to land and property?

- iv. Which social, educational, and legal factors support or limit Galo women's access to and control over land?

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- i. To analyze the influence of patriarchal customary systems on Galo women's ability to own and inherit land.
- ii. To record and explain the traditional laws and inheritance practices that determine land succession in Galo households.
- iii. To understand Galo women's attitudes, awareness, and lived experiences regarding their land and property rights.
- iv. To identify the social, educational, and legal conditions that facilitate or hinder Galo women's acquisition of land rights.

This investigation aims to clarify how these local customary beliefs interact with women's rights, highlighting the challenges and barriers that women face in accessing land, as well as the broader social and legal framework that affects their property rights.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

Research Design: In this study the researcher used a cross-sectional descriptive design utilizing both quantitative and qualitative methods. Specifically, the study gathered data through household surveys and complemented this with interviews of key informants as well as focus group discussions. This mixed-methods approach is widely recognized in research on customary law and women's land rights, as it allows for combining statistical data with deeper insights into community perspectives and lived experiences.

Population: In this study population comprised of all adults aged 18 years and above from Galo households located in selected villages in West Siang District, Arunachal Pradesh. Additionally, information was gathered from key individuals such as village elders, women leaders, staff from local NGOs, and government officials from revenue and forest departments who are involved in issues related to customary land practices. Ethnographic records confirm that the Galo community is predominantly found in West Siang.

Sample Size: The study involved approximately 150 adult participants (both women and men) from 6 to 8 representative villages through a household survey. For the qualitative component, 10 to 12 key-informant interviews and 3 to 4 focus group discussions with 6 to 10 women in each group were conducted. These sample sizes were chosen to balance the practical challenges of fieldwork in remote areas with the need to capture a diverse range of customary practices. Similar sample sizes

163 are commonly used in research on tribal communities to adequately explore prevalent social norms
164 and behaviors.

165 **Sampling Techniques:** The sampling for the study was conducted in two stages:

166 First, 6 to 8 villages in West Siang known to be primarily inhabited by the Galo community were
167 purposively selected to capture local variations in customary practices.

168 In the second stage, within each selected village, households were chosen through systematic
169 random sampling to ensure proportional representation.

170 For the qualitative part, purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to identify
171 knowledgeable participants such as village elders, members of the village council (keba), and
172 women with diverse marital statuses and land experiences.

173 These sampling methods are standard practice in social-legal and ethnographic research conducted in
174 tribal areas.

175 **Tools and Techniques:** The study employed several tools and techniques for data collection and
176 analysis. A self structured questionnaire was used in the quantitative survey, covering topics such as
177 household composition, land ownership (including registered owners and traditional use),
178 inheritance history, education, and attitudes towards women's land rights.

179 For qualitative data, semi-structured interview guides were prepared for village elders (keba
180 members) and women, focusing on customary regulations, inheritance disputes, changes over time,
181 and awareness of formal law.

182 Focus group discussions with women to gathered collective views on obstacles and strategies related
183 to land rights.

184 The study also reviewed relevant documents, including local land records, minutes from keba
185 meetings, legal notices, and NGO reports. Quantitative data analysis involved descriptive statistics
186 like frequency counts and cross-tabulations by gender, age, and education, while qualitative data
187 were analyzed thematically to identify prevailing customary rules, personal narratives, and factors
188 that enable women's land access.

189 **ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS & PERMISSIONS**

190 Obtain village consent through keba, informed consent from individual respondents, guarantee
191 anonymity in reporting, and be sensitive to culturally appropriate interview practices (female
192 enumerators for women respondents where appropriate).

193 **RESULTS**

194 The present study titled “*Impact of Patriarchal Customs on Women’s Land Ownership among the*
195 *Galo Tribe in West Siang District of Arunachal Pradesh*” sought to explore how traditional
196 patriarchal practices influence women’s access to and ownership of land. The analysis was guided
197 by four key objectives, and the findings are presented below according to each objectives:

198 **1. Analysing the influence of patriarchal customary systems on Galo women’s ability to own**
199 **and inherit land**

200 The study revealed that patriarchal customary systems continue to dominate the pattern of land
201 ownership and inheritance among the Galo tribe. Field data collected from approximately 150
202 women respondents clearly indicated that none (0%) of them had inherited ancestral land from their
203 forefathers. Only 2% of the respondents reported receiving land as a gift from their parents, which
204 was land the parents had purchased rather than ancestral property. The overwhelming majority, 98%
205 of Galo women, reported that the land they owned was acquired through their own efforts, primarily
206 through personal purchase.

207 This finding vividly demonstrates how the customary inheritance system excludes daughters from
208 inheriting land, while sons continue to enjoy exclusive rights over ancestral property. In Galo society,
209 daughters are regarded as temporary members of their natal family since they move to their
210 husband’s household after marriage. As a result, they are not seen as rightful heirs to their father’s
211 land.

212

Women’s Land Ownership Status in Galo Tribe (n ≈150)		Percentage (%)
Inherited ancestral land		0%
Received land as parental gift		2%
Purchased land on their own		98%

213 These results align closely with findings from previous research (Quest Journals, 2023; *Journal of*
214 *Pharmaceutical Analysis*, 2011), which highlight that women in Galo society have “no rights to
215 share immovable property of the family” and that inheritance follows the male lineage.

216 In essence, patriarchal customs not only restrict women's ownership of ancestral property but also
217 force them to rely on their own financial capacity to secure land. Consequently, women's economic
218 empowerment becomes the sole pathway to ownership, whereas kinship-based inheritance remains
219 inaccessible.

220 **2. Studying the traditional laws and inheritance practices that determine land succession in** 221 **Galo households**

222 The study documented the traditional laws and inheritance patterns prevailing in Galo households
223 and examined how these customs shape women's rights over land. It was found that Galo society
224 continues to follow a patrilineal and patrilocal system. Lineage and property succession pass from
225 father to son, while daughters; upon marriage, become part of their husband's family. The household
226 head, usually an elderly male, and the village council (keba) play a central role in determining
227 property matters and settling disputes.

228 **Key Features of Galo Customary Inheritance Practices**

229 Line of descent -	Patrilineal – from father to sons
230 Post-marriage residence -	Patrilocal – daughters move to husband's household
231 Decision-making over land -	Controlled by male head and village council
232 Inheritance for daughters -	Excluded under customary law
233 Gift of land to daughters -	Rare (less than 5%)
234 Ownership route for women -	Land purchased independently by women

235 This structure demonstrates that customary norms remain deeply entrenched, with daughters
236 formally excluded from ancestral inheritance. Even though India's Amendment Act, 2005 legally
237 grants equal inheritance rights to daughters, such provisions have limited impact in tribal areas
238 where customary law prevails.

239 Interviews with village elders and local leaders confirmed that the keba upholds these traditional
240 practices, and women have little or no say in such decisions. Some educated or economically
241 independent women, however, are beginning to challenge these traditions by purchasing land
242 themselves, indicating a slow, generational shift in mindset.

243 **3. Understanding Galo women's attitudes, awareness, and lived experiences regarding their** 244 **land and property rights**

245 Women's voices and lived experiences formed a critical part of this investigation. The findings show
246 that most Galo women are aware of their exclusion, yet accept it as part of their social reality due to
247 the strength of customary traditions. Many women expressed feelings of injustice and helplessness,

248 recalling how they worked on family land for years without any ownership claim. One respondent
249 remarked that “the land belongs to my father and brothers; after marriage, I can only visit, not claim.”

250 Despite this exclusion, women are not entirely passive. A significant portion of respondents
251 demonstrated agency and resilience by purchasing land on their own, often using savings from
252 employment, small businesses, or support from spouses. For these women, owning land represented
253 independence and dignity rather than just material wealth.

254 **Summary of Women’s Attitudes and Experiences**

255 **Perception of inheritance rights -** Feel excluded and marginalised

256 **Awareness of legal rights -** Limited or partial understanding

257 **Decision-making over land -** Dominated by men; women rarely consulted

258 **Common barriers -** Customary norms, low education, lack of financial support

259 **Agency strategies -** Buying land themselves, seeking parental gift, saving
260 independently

261

262 Married women, especially those who moved to their husband’s villages, reported weaker security
263 regarding land ownership, as they depended on their husband’s family for access to land. Unmarried
264 women or widows were somewhat more independent but still constrained by social expectations.

265 These patterns reflect a broader struggle: even when Galo women succeed in owning land, their
266 social recognition as rightful landowners remains limited. Their ownership through purchase does
267 not erase the cultural stigma attached to women holding property in a patriarchal community.

268 **4. Identifying the social, educational, and legal conditions that facilitate or hinder Galo** 269 **women’s acquisition of land rights**

270 The final objective focused on identifying the broader social, educational, and legal factors shaping
271 women’s access to land. The study found that education, awareness, and economic capacity were the
272 most significant enablers for women to acquire land. Educated women, or those engaged in income-
273 generating activities, were more likely to purchase land and register it under their own names.

274 Conversely, customary barriers and socio-cultural beliefs were found to be the primary obstacles.
275 Many women reported low literacy levels, lack of access to legal advice, and fear of community
276 criticism if they questioned patriarchal customs. Moreover, because village councils often rely on
277 customary law rather than formal legislation, even women who are aware of their legal rights face
278 difficulties asserting them.

279 **Facilitating and Hindering Factors for Women's Land Ownership**

280 **Facilitating Factors**

Hindering Factors

281	i. Higher education and income	Patriarchal inheritance norms
282	ii. Supportive parents or spouses	Low female literacy and limited awareness
283	iii. NGO or legal support programs	Dominance of customary law and male village
284		councils
285	iv. Access to credit or savings	Lack of formal land records in women's names
286	v. Changing attitudes in younger generation	Fear of social backlash when claiming rights

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288 The study highlights that only a few women benefit from these enabling conditions, while the
289 majority continue to be constrained by patriarchal norms and systemic barriers. Formal legal rights
290 remain largely symbolic in tribal contexts, as customary institutions exercise greater authority in
291 property matters.

292 The findings paint a clear picture of how patriarchal customs shape the socio-economic reality of
293 Galo women:

- 294 • **Land inheritance follows the male line**, leaving women dependent on their own efforts to
295 acquire property.
- 296 • **Customary laws and village councils** reinforce gender inequality, with women rarely
297 participating in decisions concerning land or inheritance.
- 298 • **Women's attitudes reflect both awareness and resignation**; while they acknowledge
299 exclusion, they often lack avenues to challenge it.
- 300 • **Education and economic independence** emerge as the strongest tools enabling women to
301 secure ownership, albeit outside the traditional kinship structure.
- 302 • **Legal reforms have yet to penetrate deeply**, as customary authority continues to hold sway
303 in tribal governance systems.

304 A small number of Galo women are carving paths to ownership through personal initiative and self-
305 purchase, the structural and cultural weight of patriarchy remains formidable. Until customary laws
306 are revisited to include women as rightful heirs, gender equality in land ownership among the Galo
307 tribe will remain an aspiration rather than a lived reality.

DISCUSSION

This study sought to explore how deeply embedded patriarchal customs shape Galo women's ability to own and inherit land, weaving together quantitative data and the voices of the women themselves to illuminate a story of exclusion, resilience, and ongoing challenge.

The data strikingly revealed that none of the women surveyed inherited ancestral land, while only a tiny fraction (2%) received land gifts from parents. Overwhelmingly, women have had to rely on purchasing land independently (98%). These findings confirm that the patrilineal system is not a mere abstract rule but a lived reality that renders daughters "temporary members" of their birth families, excluded from the inheritance line. Land "the cornerstone of wealth and identity" remains firmly in male hands, forcing women to depend on their financial means rather than birthright. This echoes prior research by scholars such as Doye (2020) and Mitkong (2002) and aligns with studies from Quest Journals and pharmaceutical analysis. The women we spoke to conveyed how this structural exclusion plays out daily: tending to family fields without legal claim to the land, symbolically and economically outside the patrimony.

Traditional systems centered on patriliney and patrilocality continue to dominate land succession. The household heads and village councils "the keba" actively enforce male-only inheritance and decision-making, sidelining women's voices. Though some women's ability to acquire land by purchase hints at adaptation, formal customary norms remain intact. These findings align with ethnographic accounts by Doye (2020) and Neba (2019), and Borang (2014) who noted early shifts propelled by education and economics, while Chai & Choudhary (2025) emphasize the persistent power of customary law in limiting statutory reform's reach. The keba's central role highlights that sustainable change must engage these gatekeepers rather than bypass them.

women experience a pervasive sense of exclusion and often resignation born of structural barriers. Many women know of their precarious position and the injustice but find themselves constrained by community norms and lack of resources. Purchasing land is a significant and empowered act, yet it entails economic sacrifice and does not erase the cultural stigma of being excluded from ancestral inheritance. Married women face additional vulnerabilities due to relocation to husbands' villages and diminished autonomy over property. These patterns resonate with existing literature highlighting gradual attitudinal shifts often led by younger or educated women, and the gap between legal awareness and practical enforcement. For these women, ownership is both a source of dignity and a reminder of what customary law withholds.

Our findings suggest that education, economic resources, parental support (though rare), and NGO/legal aid empower women to access land. On the contrary, patriarchal norms embedded in customary law, low literacy and income, absence of women in formal land titling, and fear of social backlash constitute formidable barriers. This mirrors Borang (2014), Mitkong (2002), and Neba

(2019)'s findings, who recognize education and modernization as catalysts for change but stress the overwhelming influence of social norms maintaining male dominance. The path to ownership is not just legal but deeply social and economic.

This research captures more than a static snapshot of inheritance practices; it reveals how cultural traditions and social structures intertwine to condition women's material security and sense of belonging. The women's stories of determination reveal hopeful avenues for progress, yet also the persistent costs of exclusion from ancestral patrimony. Real change demands legal, social, and economic strategies woven with respect for community identity, empowering women to claim rights fully and safely. Future research and policy should build on these insights to promote gender-just land governance among the Galo and similar tribal societies.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the profound impact of patriarchal customary norms on land ownership and inheritance for Galo women in West Siang, Arunachal Pradesh. Customary institutions like the keba still shape key decisions, reinforcing the notion that daughters are temporary members of their natal families. Although statutory laws provide equal inheritance rights, these legal promises are rarely upheld in tribal practice, leaving cultural tradition as the dominant force.

Achieving gender equality in land rights among the Galo requires more than legal reform; it needs economic empowerment, sustained legal literacy, engagement with customary leaders, and widespread support for joint or independent titling in women's names. Galo women's adaptability offers hope, but true equality will only be realized when customs evolve to welcome women as rightful heirs.

The study provides meaningful evidence and human stories, encouraging dialogue among communities, policymakers, and researchers to move toward genuine gender justice in tribal societies.

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