

Participation and Role of Women in Traditional Institutions (TIs) and Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in Kamporijo Circle of Kamle District of Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract: The participation and involvement of women in local governance provide critical indicators of democratic deepening and consideration of gender equitable ideals, particularly in its tribal setting across the regions of Northeast India. In Arunachal Pradesh, the existence of Traditional Institutions (TIs) and their parallel arrangements with the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) allows for a useful contextual picture of women's agency in political and socio-cultural life. Traditional institutions in Kamporijo Circle of Kamle district, which was loosely knitted as and when required for arbitration locally called *Mel/Nyel/Nyele* and use of *Gindu system*, as an intermediary system between the opposing parties. Later, Bango system, an exogenously imposed institutional arrangement as a village council for administrative convenience was implemented in the post Chinese war era by Dying Ering Committee recommendation, and clan-based councils, which have played a central role in their dispute resolution processes, cultural preservation, and community organization. **Objective:** The aim of the study is to explore the participation and role of women in traditional institutions (TIs) and Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in Kamporijo Circle of Kamle District of Arunachal Pradesh. **Research Methodology:** This research employed qualitative research design that included both descriptive and exploratory designs and employed them to study women's participation and their role in Traditional Institutions (TIs) and Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in the Kamporijo Circle of Kamle district of Arunachal Pradesh. The study involved the collection of primary data and secondary data. **Results and Discussions:** The role and participation of women in the traditional settings of Kamporijo Circle in the Kamle district of Arunachal Pradesh shows the existence of a deeply embedded patriarchal structure. **Conclusion:** The research reveals a labyrinth of change or flux regarding women's engagement in local governance in the Kamporijo Circle of Kamle district. Traditional Institutions (TIs), which are situated on the tribal customs remnant and yet still patriarchal system has traditionally subordinated women, granting them tokenistic or indirect participation in decision-making.

Keywords: Local Governance, Gender Equitable, Political, Socio-Cultural, Cultural Preservation.

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INTRODUCTION

The participation and involvement of women in local governance provide critical indicators of democratic deepening and consideration of gender equitable ideals, particularly in its tribal setting across

the regions of Northeast India. In Arunachal Pradesh, which has diversity of indigenous communities and institutions as well as customary institutions, the existence of Traditional Institutions (TIs) and their parallel arrangements with the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), allows for a useful contextual picture

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of women's agency in political and socio-cultural life. Kamporijo Circle, in Kamle district, is located in a predominantly Nyishi tribal area where traditional institutions, which include *Gindu* (traditional arbitration system) and *Mel/Nyel/Nyele* as both traditional institutions and later *Bango* system (village grouping system) externally determined was implemented in the post Chinese war era by Dying Ering Committee recommendation, and clan-based councils, have played a central role in their dispute resolution processes, cultural preservation, and community organization (Elwin, 1959; Chaudhuri, 2004). These institutions are based in patriarchal values, have systematically maintained the exclusion of women from participation, limited to a role in the private life sphere (not formal decision-making). However, the introduction of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act in 1992 transformed institutions of local governance, and institutionalized this into a Panchayati Raj system in India. This resulted in the establishment of a three-tier system of decentralized governance for the secular and open institutions of local governance with the reservation of one-third in all seats up to each Gram Panchayat, Anchal Samiti (Panchayat Samiti) and Zilla Parishad for women (Mathew, 1995). The PRI model of governance was brought in Arunachal Pradesh in 2003 creates a formal parallel structure alongside these traditional bodies mobilizing space for change in local governance practices (Government of Arunachal Pradesh, 2004). Although the PRIs have opened formal opportunities for women's political representation and leadership, actual empowerment relies on several factors such as education, customary norms, control of resources and political awareness (Agrawal & Gibson, 1999; Mishra, 2020).

This paper explores the changing role of women in both TIs and PRIs in Kamporijo Circle in woven customary and formal governance structures, focusing on how the governance cultures shape women's participation, representation and empowerment. This study also looks at the contradictions, similarities and transitions between the two institutions to produce a grounded understanding of the intersection of gender, tradition and democracy in a tribal context.

OBJECTIVE

The objective of the study is to explore the participation and role of women in traditional institutions (TIs) and Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in Kamporijo Circle of Kamle District of Arunachal Pradesh.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research employed qualitative research design that included both descriptive and exploratory designs and employed them to study women's participation and their role in Traditional Institutions (TIs) and Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in the

Kamporijo Circle of Kamle district of Arunachal Pradesh. The methodology was also designed in a way that it can fully address how gender roles, culture and institutional change occur in the tribal governance system.

1. Study areas:

The study area of the Kamporijo Circle is a somewhat remote, administrative sub-division of the Kamle district where most of the people belong to the Nyishi tribe. The area is unique in that both the Traditional Institutions with its customary ways of having *Gindu* (traditional arbitration system), *Mel (Nyel/Nyele)*, as traditional institution and later *Bango* system (grouping of villages) was imposed externally, existed alongside the legally defined Panchayati Raj Institutions.

2. Data Sources:

The study involves the collection of primary data and secondary data. We obtained the primary data through field surveys of semi-structured interviews, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions (FGDs). Survey and interviewing were conducted by base respondents: Women representatives in PRIs (Gram Panchayat and Anchal Samiti levels), Traditional elders and leaders (men & women), Members of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and NGO workers and practitioners (e.g., IDEA project staff). We also obtained secondary data from government reports (e.g., Arunachal Pradesh Panchayati raj Act, RGSA guidelines, etc), documentation and reports from NGOs on the, Academic literature and ethnography (e.g., Elwin, 1959; Bordoloi *et al.*, 1980; Das & Tamo, 2011; Mishra, 2020).

3. Sampling Technique:

A purposive sampling technique assessing women's participation and representation with PRI/TRIEFO systems was adopted for recruiting the research respondents who belonged to local governance structure or were otherwise affected. Women who contested PRI elections had priority, female SHG leaders, and traditional stakeholders who believed they had some understanding of gendered governance practices.

4. Tools and Techniques for Interview Schedules:

Designed to reflect perspectives on women's roles, challenges and opportunities within TIs and PRIs. Focus Group Discussions: Conducted separately with groups of women PRI members, groups of SHG members and youth groups, to hopefully understand their collective perceptions Observations: Ethnographies were informally observed in village council meetings and community events, specifically noting non-verbal interactions and symbolic exclusion/inclusion of women.

5. Data Analysis:

The data collected were analysed using thematic content analysis, attended to common themes and patterns reoccurred including: Institutional impediments to participation; Women's agency in formal/informal structure; Interfacing SHGs, PRIs and TIs; the roles of education, kinship, and patriarchy upon governance. Findings were interpreted in gender, tribal customary law, and decentralized governance contexts.

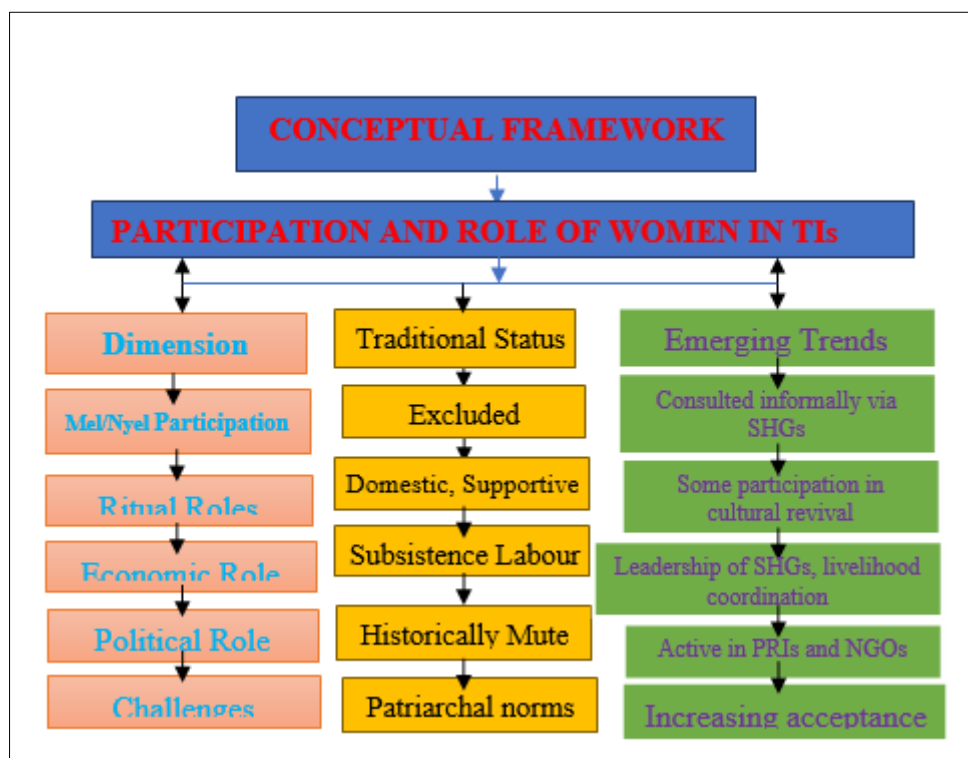
6. Limitations:

The sample size was small due to the context being remote and accessibility issues and therefore not all women in the region may be fully represented. There were also issues regarding the reluctance of some traditional leaders to participate due to sensitivities around customary practices and gender norms. The study was conducted over a brief fieldwork period, and longitudinal experiences of changes over time were not fully identified.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

PARTICIPATION AND ROLE OF WOMEN IN TIs

The role and participation of women in the traditional settings of Kamporijo Circle in the Kamle district of Arunachal Pradesh shows the existence of a deeply embedded patriarchal structure, especially in the context of Nyishi. Despite the persistence of traditional institutions having *Gindu* (traditional arbitration system), *Mel* (*Nyel/Nyele*), as traditional institution and later *Bango* system (grouping of villages) which was exogenously imposed, and clan-based councils having a central place in community governance or dispute settlement practice, women's access to these institutions has typically been limited or symbolic. However, various incremental changes exist through grassroots mobilization, SHGs, and state-sponsored initiatives. The details are shown in the diagram of Conceptual Framework shown below.



EXPLANATION OF THE CONCEPTUAL DIAGRAM

The conceptual framework illustrated in this investigation provides an overview of these two institutional realms: TIs and PRIs, and their associated regulations, both as discrete and interrelated structures of authority where women participate or exercise agency or experience empowerment, as well as the differing contexts in which women's positions are defined in the context of TIs compared to those of PRIs based upon a combination of historical, cultural, constitutional and

socio-economic considerations. On the first tier of the diagram, TIs are customary institutions, including *Gindu* (Traditional arbitration system) as well as Local Clan Councils in the Nyishi region of Kamporijo, and these TIs have historically provided the foundation for governance in the region. As illustrated in the conceptual diagram, TIs are rooted in entrenched patriarchal traditions and customs where men's participation is often the only means by which they can communicate their opinions during formal decision-making processes. In the context of TI governance, the way that women are

perceived is limited to domestic, supportive and ritualistic roles while having no formal authority over issues such as ownership of land, inheritance, dispute resolution or political deliberation (Elwin, 1959; Bordoloi *et al.*, 1980). As seen in the diagram, because of the limited or broken connection between women and TIs with respect to their core TI decision-making nodes, this has historically resulted in women maintaining a "mute" political status in the context of customary governance (Tamo, 2007).

The graphic representation of emerging trends within TIs (Traditional Institutions), demonstrates that although it will take some time for all women to gain access to TIs, there have been gradual, but important, changes taking place that will make it possible for all women to access TIs. Specifically,

- a) Women have begun to participate informally through Self-Help Groups (SHGs),
- b) Women's roles in the economy have increased, and
- c) Women are participating in cultural revival activities.

These trends in TIs demonstrate that as women begin participating, they will be able to create transitional paths that help break down the barriers of traditional custom. In addition, these trends illustrate that through grassroots organizing efforts and the involvement of NGOs such as the Itanagar Diocesan Empowerment Association (IDEA) (IDEA, 2008; Yakar, 2024), women have been able to create a space for themselves in the traditionally exclusive structure of TI.

In contrast to the first component of the diagram, which represents structural restrictions and gradual movements away from restrictions, the second major component of the diagram focuses on Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) as an avenue for women's involvement in the governance of their communities, which is supported by a constitutional provision (Article 243 D of the Constitution of India) and legal recognition through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment (1992) and Arunachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act (Government of Arunachal Pradesh, 2004) and allows for the establishment of 33% reservation for women in local governance/Gram Panchayat and Anchal Samiti Members and their participation is depicted in Kamporijo.

The diagram under the PRI framework shows the functional roles of women in development administration such as implementation of welfare schemes like MGNREGA, PMAY, ICDS, health and sanitation, and education. It also includes training and capacity building mechanisms, including the Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan (RGSA) which support and advance women's capability for leadership and building confidence in their administrative role (Ministry of

Panchayati Raj, 2022). Unlike TIs, women's involvement in PRIs is represented in a formal and visible way, and protected by law, breaking away from the tradition of customary exclusion of women. However, the diagram also shows that PRIs should not be seen as unqualified empowerment for women, as it highlights additional barriers that exist to their effectiveness in participating in PRIs, such as proxy leadership, limited literacy, resistance from patriarchal systems, and customary gender dominance (Mishra, 2020; Yakar, 2024). These barriers are shown to be intersecting forces that undermine the ability to turn the number of women participating into the empowerment of women, especially when PRI decisions are in conflict with traditional institutions. An important aspect of the conceptual diagram is that it depicts the ways TIs and PRIs intersect and overlap with each other. Women leaders often exist at this intersection, using PRIs as their source of legitimacy but at the same time negotiating and finding acceptance in traditional forums through self-help groups (SHGs), kinship networks, and community participation in a collaborative manner. Visually, this interaction is depicted as a contested, negotiated, and partially converging space of interaction between the two forms of leadership, where women's leadership has the potential to disrupt established leadership norms and yet continues to be shaped by cultural continuities (Das & Tamo, 2011).

The Principal Model of the Core Argument of the study represents the author's argument that the continuum of women's participation (From Exclusion Through Empowerment) is influenced by the co-existence of both customary/traditional and constitutional a legal framework for women's rights) institutions. While the traditional societal structure is more restrictive to women and contributes to their subordination due to existing forms of patriarchy, It is through institutional forms of Panchayati Raj that there is the beginning of transformation toward the political inclusion of women. Thus, the framework reflects the source of analysis of how gender, tradition, and democracy are related in the context of tribes and provides evidence of the conclusion of the study that in order to achieve sustainable empowerment of women, there has to be a combination of institutional convergence and a degree of societal sensitivity and building capacity over time.

1. Traditional Exclusion from Decision-Making:

Traditionally, women in Kamporijo have no formal representation in traditional decision-making institutions, which are composed mainly by male elders and women's voice has been virtually absent in dispute settlements, land decisions, and ritual leader roles. Elwin writes "traditional village councils among the Adi and Nyishi tribes have been exclusively male institutions which women perform entirely different roles" (Elwin, 1959; Bordoloi *et al.*, 1980). Even during communal

rituals, or festivals, Nyshi women have tended to play roles in the domestic spheres of festivity, typically taking supportive roles and not serving in authority or in roles of ritual leadership.

2. Cultural Norms Mandating Gender Roles:

Women's roles in Kamporijo, as in most tribal societies of central Arunachal, have always been traditional and associated with domestic/reproductive functions, which limited participation in public and political life:

- (i) Traditionally, women were not allowed to talk in the major proceeding of Village Council nor make any decisions on land inheritance, community punishments, or inter-village discussions.
- (ii) Inheritance of clan property and leadership positions is patriarchal and passed down's through male lines. "Customary practices are gendered deeply; women are regarded as custodians of domestic and moral values, but not political agents" (Tamo, 2007).
- (iii) Emerging Participation through Grassroots Mobilization: The intervention of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), like the Itanagar Diocesan Empowerment Association (IDEA), in the early 2000s, marked a turning point in Kamporijo. Women in the region began developing Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and capacity development programmes in leadership. By 2008, there were over 45 SHGs led by women in Kamporijo and 42 farmers' clubs, many of which also included female coordinators.
- (iv) Women were experiencing a means to gain financial independence, and pursue training opportunities to develop their leadership skills, and many were engaging in collective bargaining, which was beginning to change social expectations. "Women in Kamporijo, who had previously participated in public discourse just through their influence or power behind men, began negotiating with traditional elders through self-help groups (SHGs), advancing their social and economic role" (IDEA, 2008). While these were technically outside the structurally formed traditional institutions, they were still frequently used to obtain permission for their livelihood and community infrastructure activities and to seek support from traditional institutions.

3. Resistance from Traditional Elders and Systemic Barriers: Nevertheless, patriarchal resistance from traditional institutions prevails despite these achievements:

- (i) Women leaders may feel social pressure or symbolic inclusion, they may be in a community meeting but not able to speak or vote.
- (ii) Some of the SHG members stated that elders consult them only related to women's issues such as child health or food distribution and do not consult them on issues related to the governance of the village or

land: "Even when women make it into the public domain via SHGs or PRIs, traditional elders do not recognize them as legitimate and as if they are subordinate or symbolic" (Yakar, 2024, p. 1816).

4. Intersection with Panchayati Raj Institutions: The intersection of PRIs and traditional institutions has become an arena of negotiation for women's agency:

- (i) Although women elected in Gram Panchayats due to the rule of 33% reservation experience pushback from leaders from the traditional institutions in the villages such as those in Kamporijo.
- (ii) Some women PRI representatives are also able to draw on their SHG work and community connections to informal acceptance of their legitimacy from TIs. "In some cases, women have used their status as a Panchayat and the networking of SHGs to demand a seat at the table in traditional councils, but these changes stay local and continue to be contested" (Das & Tamo, 2011).

DISCUSSION IN DETAIL

In Kamporijo, women's role in traditional institutions is constrained but is shifting. Traditional governance remains a space firmly rooted in patriarchal structures that uniquely constrains women and their formal inclusion in traditional governance. However, the emergence of SHGs, participation in PRIs, and interventions by NGOs are beginning to disrupt these norms. We see a unique hybrid option—combining customary acceptance with legitimate empowerment and capacity-building—as the most impactful option in empowering women in both traditional communities and expanding possibilities with modern institutional structures.

PARTICIPATION AND ROLE OF WOMEN IN PRIs

The participation and role of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in Kamporijo Circle (in Kamle district, Arunachal Pradesh) have undergone considerable transformation since the establishment of the two-tier Panchayati Raj system in Arunachal Pradesh. The inclusion of women in PRIs, corroborated by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act 1992, and Arunachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act 1997 (amended in 2018) has made significant progress and also presented some challenges within the traditional male dominated tribal society.

1. Constitutional Mandate and Reservation Policy:

The 73rd amendment provides 33% reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions in all the states including Arunachal Pradesh. In the 2013 PRI elections in Arunachal Pradesh, women were elected for more than 33% of the seats including Gram Panchayats and Zilla Parishads (in district like Kamle, where the Kamporijo Circle is located). The constitutional mandate of one third reservation for women has resulted to increase a

number of women in PRIs even in the remote tribal belts like Kaporijo (Yakar, 2024, p. 1813).

2. Increasing Representation in Local Governance: In the recent electoral cycle, women from Kaporijo and the surrounding areas contested and secured Gram Panchayat Member (GPM) and Anchal Samiti Member (ASM) positions, joining local governance decision making for:

- (i) Infrastructure development at village level (road, irrigation, sanitation).
- (ii) Implementation of government schemes such as MGNREGA, PMAY, PDS, determination of ICDS.
- (iii) Health, education and livelihood-based projects: These roles in local governance are often enhanced through training under schemes like the Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan (RGSA) program which has been critical to building the capacity of women leaders in tribal areas. Women leaders of PRIs have become key actors in the mobilization of SHGs, oversight of welfare programs, and resolution of some of their local grievances (IDEA, 2008).

3. Blockages: Proxy Leadership and the Patriarchy, though the constitution has provided them with power, women representatives of PRI still face blockages to realise their responsibilities in Kaporijo:

- (i) Many women members are still indirectly represented to there being also a male proxy acting for them.
- (ii) Many women members are not formally educated or trained to participate meaningfully in meetings and preparing for planning.
- (iii) The presence of men persists. Village leaders and Councils (TIs), which are traditionally male domains do not always honour the privileges of PRIs because of customary practices. "Men in customary systems of patriarchy still provide barriers against women in tribal Arunachal; women PRIs still take to be passive also because of their society and lack of culturally-appropriate institutionalisation and process frameworks" (Yakar, 2024, p. 1815).

4. Linkages with Self-Help Groups and Grassroots: Mobilisation in Kaporijo, women's roles as representatives of PRIs have been further strengthened as a result of the other empowerment Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in Kaporijo by Itanagar Diocesan Empowerment Association also known as IDEA:

- (i) Women leaders of SHGs contest for membership in a Panchayat or become veteran members of the Panchayat draw on their lived experiences from SHGs to influence development in their respective communities.
- (ii) The SHGs have increased women's understanding of their finances, improves their confidence and regulate their initial comfort to meaningfully participate in governance. "Women SHG leaders successfully in Kaporijo have transitioned to be wives acted as intermediaries in the transition from grass roots engagement and institutional representation in a structure of PRIs" (IDEA, 2008).

5. Policy Implementation and Impacts of Leadership: Women PRI members in Kaporijo have been engaged in:

- Following up on Anganwadi Centres to guarantee that child nutrition and health services are delivered.
- Monitoring the distribution of MGNREGA job cards and implementation of worksites.
- Advocating for women's toilets, maternal health care, and school infrastructure in Gram Sabha meetings. However, how they carried out these functions was, in most cases, highly variable and contingent on their own education level, family support, and the willingness of their male counterparts to consist of them in village decision-making. "Even with structural inclusion, agency for women leaders depends heavily on the decline in socio-cultural practices in their village, and with the support of networks like SHGs and other groups" (Das & Tamo, 2011).

Table 1: Summary of the Women Participation in PRIS

Dimension	Women Participation in PRIs
Inclusion of the Law	33% reserve is required by law.
Real Involvement	Growing but not uniformly; many elected through SHG connections
Typical Roles	Monitoring programs, community mobilisation, health, and education
Principal Difficulties	Social conservatism, limited literacy, and proxy leadership
Structures of Support	SHG networks, RGSA training, and NGO assistance

It is important to note that women's participation in PRIs in Kaporijo is certainly a transformational shift away from patriarchal forms of governance to more inclusive forms of grassroots governance; but still remains subordinate to pre-existing norms, educational disadvantages, and patriarchal power relations in the public sphere. While the framework in

which to achieve more political agency for women has been established in the Constitution; in practice, the actual empowerment of women requires, on an ongoing basis, capacity-building provisions, community sensitisation, and coordination with traditional institutions. The convergence of SHGs and PRI forums

has been significant for elevating women's voices and leadership within their community.

CONCLUSION

The research reveals a labyrinth of change or flux regarding women's engagement in local governance in the Kamporijo Circle of Kamle district. Traditional Institutions (TIs), which are based on the tribal customs remnant and yet still patriarchal system as in case of Nyishi community, have traditionally subordinated women, granting them tokenistic or indirect participation in decision-making.

As an example, in traditional arbitration system, called *Gindu* and traditional institutions known as *Mel/Nyel/Nyele*, along with clan council forums, continue to be male-dominated, controlled by customs or elder-prerogatives, and women practically excluded from TIs' formal and representative processes or societal acceptance. Some women utilized informal pathways to participate, such as being consulted at informal meetings or unofficially supported at formal meetings related to TI structures. The situation has altered in part because Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), developed through the leader's increase of political authority in response to the 73rd Constitutional Amendment in 1993, introduced a democratic and constitutional structure of governance with gender inclusiveness through reservation. This change provided women in Kamporijo with a constitutional mechanism to run for elections and to participate in village governance, which has produced a minor recognition that gender roles can be altered. Collective agency of women's rights-women PRI members were encouraged to participate with increased assurance in a number of areas including education, health, sanitation, and social justice, although TIs continue to structure several barriers in terms of social norms and political or governance processes (e.g., training, elite capture, tokenism, and gender stereotypes). TIs and PRIs co-exist in Kamporijo; producing both contestation and complementarity. TIs represent indigenous knowledge and cultural bonafides in village governance; while PRIs represent constitutional authority and development of gender inclusive governance. Yet this duality can also obviate tension, especially in situations of traditional norms and customs asserting resistance against women's rights and the values of democratic governance.

While instances of cooperation between these systems are few and far between, they are nevertheless increasing, whether in the form of women's voices acting as mediators of conflict or in development planning decisions (Kamporijo 2016). In summary, while women's engagement in TIs is largely symbolic and minimal, and perhaps even on a slow down trajectory, PRIs are a transformational space for female political participation and local empowerment. While the blend of traditions and democracy in Kamporijo is still forging

ahead, as more women become involved in PRIs, redefining gender roles within traditional structures is inevitable (albeit over time). For this social transformation to become a reality, investment in longer term interventions, including legal literacy, political engagement, community engagement, and institutional partnerships will be necessary to ensure that traditional and modern systems of governance commit towards inclusion, equity and gender justice.

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