



Invisible Hands, Visible Contributions: Unveiling the Role of Tiwa Women in the Economy and Society

Pubalee Kakati

Doctoral Research Scholar, Department of Sociology, Assam University, Silchar

Email ID: pubaleekakati@gmail.com

Prof. Humayun Bokth

Professor, Department of Sociology, Assam University, Silchar

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21478631>

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Received: 17-05-2026

Accepted: 21-06-2026

Published: 15-07-2026

Keywords:

Invisible Hands, Indigenous community, economy, Tribe, Tiwa, Women, Gender

ABSTRACT

The contribution of women constitutes a significant component of every society. Their great contribution covers all the societal aspects beyond the households. Similarly, among the indigenous community, like the Tiwas, women provided services not only within the household but also beyond it. During their free time, they have engaged in agricultural work, animal and cattle rearing, beekeeping, weaving, crafting, etc., yet their labour and participation in the workforce remain negligible. Despite the vital contribution within the household and beyond it, their contribution is often regarded as unpaid labour. Society usually considers their contribution as the contribution of the invisible hand. Adam Smith used the term “Invisible Hand” in his book to refer to how an individual’s self-interest can unintentionally benefit society. The phrase reflects the paradox that though women often take all the responsibilities, they are often neglected in society. However, in reality, their participation in the economy is undeniable. For the economic upliftment of women of the Tiwa society, along with the government initiatives, NGO’s contributions, and self- help groups

Disclaimer: The opinions, interpretations, conclusions, recommendations, analyses, and statements expressed in this research article are solely those of the author(s) and do not reflect the views, policies, or positions of the Publisher, Chief Editor, Editors, Editorial Board, Reviewers, or their affiliated institutions. The author(s) are solely responsible for ensuring the originality, authenticity, and integrity of the manuscript and for ensuring that it is free from plagiarism, AI-generated content, copyright infringement, data falsification, and any other form of academic misconduct.

generate several opportunities. This article attempts to examine the role and significance of the Tiwa women in the economy. Beyond the household activities or domestic work, how they remarkably contribute and manage everything is the key aspect of the discussion. The study further elaborates how societal norms and gender-based division in the workforce have created challenges among the women of the Tiwas. Those aspects and social restrictions sometimes emerged as obstacles for the women of the Tiwa community.

1. Introduction

Adam Smith, the founder of modern economics, explained the unintentional contribution of individuals towards social development by the metaphor “Invisible Hand” through his work. In a society, when an individual engages in economic activities such as production, consumption and distribution, to fulfil their needs or to improve their livelihood, unintentionally they contribute towards the overall development of the society as well. As an invisible hand, they pay their unseen labour to society. Behind the growth and development of every society, the visible contributions of the invisible hands can’t be denied.

Among the indigenous societies, the contribution of women is often neglected by society. They intentionally overlooked the labour of the women as if it were an invisible hand. Though women do hard work not only within the household, but also beyond it, they are often neglected in society. Besides the household work, they also take care of their children, domestic animals and agriculture-related activities; society feel hesitate to appreciate the labour of the women. Participation of women in the economy is a crucial element for society, especially among the tribes. Regardless of the gender role, women provide immense services in the field of the economy. They equally do hard work with men; sometimes, in some spheres, more than men.

The Tiwa is an important ethnic group of Assam. They belong to the Tibeto- Burman linguistic group, formerly known as “Lalung”. However, they like to introduce themselves as Tiwas. (Bordoloi, 1984). In the Tiwa society, the participation of women is significant in terms of the economy. However, in some spheres, their participation is totally negligible. Though the hill Tiwas follow a matrilineal social system, in decision-making or in terms of authority, men have enjoyed the ultimate benefits in the society.

2. Review of the Literature



A number of works have been found in sociology and gender studies related to women's unseen labour in society and their significant contribution. They have extensively examined women's participation in tribal economies from different perspectives.

Waring (1988) discussed, from a feminist perspective, how women's unpaid household or domestic labour is excluded from the national income accounting. The core argument of the book is that **“what is not counted is often treated as if it has no value.”**

Agarwal (1994) argued that rights of access to productive resources (mainly the land) can strengthen the economic accessibility of women. She emphasised that ownership of land or any property improves the status of women in society.

Pérez (2019) discussed that the invisibility of women's workforce participation is not because of the lack of participation, but because of the inability to focus on and discuss about their livelihood. He argued that there are many tools and indicators in the economy, but no single indicator is able to reflect or count the unpaid domestic labour of women.

Federici (2012) described the relationship between capitalism and the unpaid labour of women. From the Marxist point of view, she argued that household work, child care, emotional support, and reproductive labour are productive work and valuable contributions to the economy that women provide, because through this work they not only manage the domestic work, but also produce the future producers. Only because of the unpaid nature of their labour is it invisible in society.

Although the literature highlights the participation of women of the different communities in various activities, a few works are found on the condition of the Tiwa women who manage and maintain all the unpaid labour. Analysing it from a sociological dimension is significant and has immense potential for scientific research.

Objectives of the Study

- To examine the significance of the participation of the Tiwa women in the economy.
- To understand the constraints on the participation of women in economic activities.

3. Methodology

To fulfil the objectives of the study, a qualitative as well as quantitative research approach is adopted. The quantitative method helps to present the numerical values, while the qualitative data helps to get insights or



to understand the issues, facts and challenges. Data has been collected from both primary and secondary sources.

Universe of the Study: For the study, Bormarjong Village of Amri Development Block under the West Karbi- Anglong district was selected as the Universe of the Study.

Size of Sample: The total population of the Tiwas women in the Bormarjong village is 228, as per the 2011 census. This village is selected because it is one of the oldest and the parent village of the Tiwas. Since the population is high, a sample size is selected through Solvin's formula.

According to Solvin's formula, the sample size (n) is $= \frac{N}{1+Ne^2}$

Where, n = Sample size

N= Total Population size

e = Level of precision (sampling error)

For your study:

N=228

The margin of error is= 0.08 (8% margin of error)

Therefore, the required sample size is 93 as per Solvin's formula.

From the Bormarjong village, randomly collected Tiwa women for the study.

Tools of Data Collection: To collect the data, various tools were used, such as interviews, observations, and ethnography, etc.

4. Result and Discussion

In contemporary society, the concept of "Invisible labour" is very relevant and important to understand the contribution of women in the economy as well as society. It is also applied as a framework to understand the reasons behind the exclusion of women's participation in the workforce or considered as invisible labour.

In every society, women are forced to do domestic work and work outside, which creates a "Double Burden" on them. Even though they engage in income-generating labour, they have to continue their daily



household activities as their primary labour. In some societies, if they go out for any service, society creates pressure on them.

The women of the Tiwa society play a multifaceted role in their economy through their participation within households and beyond households. Besides the domestic work, their participation in livestock rearing, handloom weaving, collecting forest resources, trade and market and wage earning is crucial. Those activities not only contribute substantially to generating income but also help to maintain a stable livelihood for the family.

Agriculture is the primary sphere of the economy where women's participation is a remarkable aspect. As agriculture is an indispensable part of the Tiwa society, women do hard work for it. The spans of their involvement are found in every stage of cultivation, from the seed selection to harvesting the crops. Additionally, their responsibilities are not limited to the cultivation, but also include redistribution and marketing of the products. Despite their substantial contribution, it is considered an extension of the household work rather than productive labour. Society often underestimates the role of women as an invisible hand.

Handloom weaving reflects another significant economic activity undertaken by the Tiwa women. Weaving has generally served both economic and cultural purposes. While they also produce a surplus amount for sale in the nearby market, through which they can earn something for the family. Traditionally, they weave Kasong, Phaskai, Tagla, etc. They form a self-help group and weave surplus amounts for the market to sell.

Rearing the livestock is another responsibility of the women of the Tiwa society. They are primarily responsible for taking care of the livestock, feeding them, cleaning, and managing poultry, pigs, birds, goats, ducks, etc. In those activities, continuous efforts and labour are required regularly throughout the year. Besides generating income, it also provides financial support during an emergency for the household. However, livestock rearing is also not considered an economic activity; rather, it is categorised as a part of household activity.

Market participation promotes women's financial independence among the Tiwa women. The market sphere is also dominated by women. From the weekly market to the annual fair of Junbeel, the Tiwa women play a crucial role. They carry all the home-grown surplus products to exchange in the market.

In the Bormarjong village, like the others, natives also depend on agriculture, and allied activities are an inseparable part of their livelihood. Within the economy, women hold the space to sustain both the economy

and society. Their participation extended beyond the households, and responsible for rearing cattle, weaving clothes, horticulture, sericulture, etc.

To gain insights into the role of women in the economy and society of the Bormarjong village, it is essential to understand their contributions in a holistic way, including both domestic and broader contexts. The below- mentioned table attempts to present the distribution of respondents of the Bormarjong village, according to their participation in various activities.

Table No. 1

Distribution of respondents of the Bormarjong village, according to their participation in various activities.

Serial No	Economic Activity	Frequency of Women's Participation	Percentage %
1	Cultivation	81	87.10%
2	Animal Husbandry	69	74.19%
3	Weaving	41	44.09%
4	Wage- Labour	31	33.33%
5	Government services	5	5.37%
6	Private Services	8	8.60%
7	Others	4	4.30%

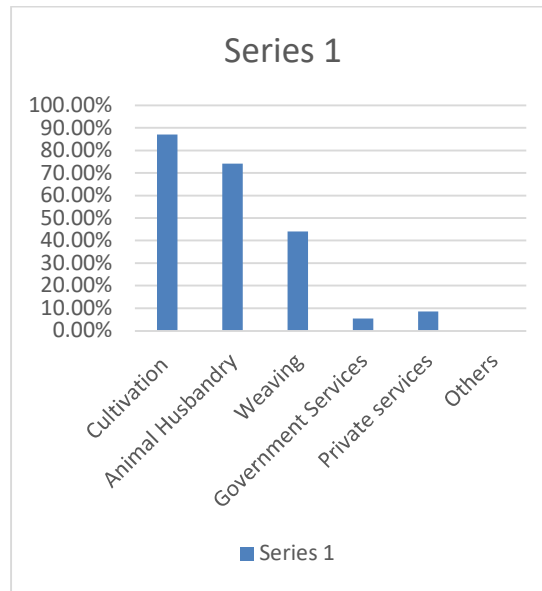
Source: Field Study, 2025

From the above- mentioned table, it has been found that the maximum number of women in the Bormarjong Village are engaged in cultivation. Out of 93 women, 81 are engaged in cultivation. Followed by animal husbandry, weaving and wage labour. The number of women working in the government sector is low in the Tiwa society. The participation of women in the workforce is significant in every sphere of society.

For better understanding and to visualise the data, numerical values are presented in a vertical bar chart as follows:

Figure No. 1

Distribution of respondents of the Bormarjong village, according to their participation in various activities



Source: Field Survey, 2025.

From the Sociological point of view, the table reveals that Tiwa women play an important role as both household workers and economic producers. Their strong participation in cultivation and livestock rearing indicates their great contribution towards the economy and society of the community. Though their contribution remains invisible and underestimated, no one can deny their significant contribution.

5. Constraints to the Participation of Women in the Economy

Like the other societies, among the Tiwas, certain rules and regulations have become obstacles for women to participate in the workforce. The limited access to education, skill development training, technological development skills, and improper and unsafe workplace situations often emerge as a hindrance to women's participation in the workforce beyond the household. Moreover, societal norms, customs and traditions also affect them, and set an invisible boundary for the growth and development of women.

Instead of encouraging the participation of women of the Tiwas, society influenced them to abide by the traditional and conservative rules, which, to some extent, created challenges.

6. Conclusion

The economy of the Tiwas is household-based, primarily dependent on agriculture. Self-subsistence is the main purpose of production. Since the economic condition of the Tiwas is not sound, participation of both men and women is essential for the household economy. In that case, the participation of women should be encouraged and motivated, rather than classified merely as household unpaid work. However, the increasing



rate of women's participation in the economy has not signified equal control over production and the authority of decision- making. Their equal participation in the field of education, financial decisions, and political power is also important for the overall development of the Tiwa community, because only an increasing number of women's participation in every field can empower women as a whole. Along with all those initiatives, awareness and voices of women belonging to the Tiwas are significant for the overall development and growth of the community. Their participation in every field of society, including not only the economy, but also in the polity, culture, socio- religious, activities are crucial. They need to come forward in large numbers, engage in every field, should not limit themselves to boundaries to fly, update with current socio- political issues, and appoint more in various government and cooperative works. After all, their own consciousness or awareness of the development is the key aspect.

By recognising both their visible and invisible contribution, society can achieve gender-equitable development. It is fundamental for the even growth and development of the community.

7. Acknowledgement

I express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Prof. Humayun Bokth and all the faculty members of the Department of Sociology, Assam University, Silchar, for their constant support and encouragement. I would also like to thank my parent for their love and motivation. Moreover, the successful completion of the study would not have been possible without the help, support, and co-operation of the respondents, to whom I would like to extend my sincere gratitude.

8. Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest to declare.

Bibliography

- Agarwal, B. (1994). *A field of one's own: Gender and land rights in South Asia*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bhattacharjee, J. B. (1987). *The tribes of Assam*.
- Bordoloi, B. N. (1984). *Tribes of Assam: Part III*. Tribal Research Institute, Government of Assam.
- Criado Pérez, C. (2019). *Invisible women: Data bias in a world designed for men*. Abrams Press.



- Elwin, V. (1964). *The tribal world of Verrier Elwin*. Oxford University Press.
- Federici, S. (2012). *Revolution at point zero: Housework, reproduction, and feminist struggle*. PM Press.
- Vidyarthi, L. P., & Rai, B. K. (1985). *The tribal culture of India*. Concept Publishing Company.
- Waring, M. (1988). *If women counted: A new feminist economics*. Harper & Row.
- Yamane, T. (1967). *Statistics: An introductory analysis* (2nd ed.). Harper & Row.