

EXPLORATORY

# Economic Empowerment of Tribal Women through Non-Timber Forest Products

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## ABSTRACT

The present paper attempts to explore and analyze the purpose of women collecting Non-Timber Forest Products based on the socioeconomic status of the women and their households. The study finds that 59.14% of women respondents were engaged in collecting NTFPs. The study employed Binary Logistic Regression for data analysis. The logistic regression analysis shows that the respondent's main occupation, total household income excluding income from NTFPS, respondent's age, respondent's educational level, household size and distance to market significantly influences the dependence of women in NTFPs to earn cash income. The study found the distance to the market an important deciding factor for women to earn cash income from NTFPs. Women staying nearer to the market were more likely to earn cash income from NTFPs than those who live far from the market. Therefore the study suggests the need for government and non-government institutions (NGOs) intervention to initiate training and capacity building for the tribal women at the village level to bring more women to the market.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- 59.14 % of the women depend on NTFPs, out of which 61.35 % utilize NTFPs for subsistence needs only and 38.65% of the women utilize NTFPs for subsistence needs and for earning cash income.
- Distance to market is negatively associated with women's engagement in collecting NTFPs to earn cash income.
- Need of the government and non-government (NGO's) institutions' interventions to initiate training and capacity building for the tribal women, such as value-added production techniques and vegetable preservation techniques through Self-help Groups or women's organizations at the village level to bring more women into the market despite the long market distance.

**Keywords:** Women, Non-timber forest products, Economic, Empowerment

The livelihood of tribal communities has been intertwined with the forest for generations, meeting both their subsistence needs and providing a source of monetary income. As per the Forest Survey of India, 2021, Forest cover of India constitutes of 21.71% of the total geographical area, Manipur forest cover constitutes of 74.34% of the total geographical area and Tamenglong forest cover constitutes 86.41% of the total geographical area (Forest survey of India, 2021). The 'very dense forest' of Tamenglong constitutes 43.33% of the total 'very dense forest' of whole Manipur (Forest survey of India report, 2021).

Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs) play a vital role among the tribal communities, serving as both a source of income and a means of sustaining their livelihoods. The multiplicity of utilization of NTFPs and their significance in meeting both subsistence needs and income generation requirements are now increasingly acknowledged for alleviating rural poverty by providing employment opportunities

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to unemployed individuals, both men and women, through the harvesting of NTFPs (Chauhan *et al.* 2014). According to FAO (2009), nearly 400 million people living in and around forests in India depend on Non-Wood Forest Products (NWFPs) for sustenance and supplemental income. NWFPs contribute significantly to the income of about 30% of rural people and more than 80% of forest dwellers depend on NWFPs for basic necessities.

Women mostly deal with lower-value products and lower-value activities than men (Carr *et al.* 2008), engaging in income-generating activities that centre on the household's intermediate survival needs rather than activities that require longer-term investment because of the limitations given to them in society. These activities heavily rely on the land and the available natural resources such as the collection, consumption and trade of Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs).

Women are the primary harvester of Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs), and it plays a vital role in supporting household livelihood security throughout the year, providing subsistence needs and cash income. Tribal women have a heritage of close association with forests (Ghosh, 2009). From an economic perspective, the forest economy plays a central role in the livelihood strategies of tribal households (Shangpliang, 2012), and its resources represent a valuable natural capital for the rural economy. Many communities from Northeast India traditionally depend on forest products, especially non-timber forest products, which play a significant role in maintaining subsistence and supporting livelihood security in rural communities living around forest areas (Duttagupta *et al.* 2016, Cocks & Wiersum, 2003). The forest is like a storehouse of their daily necessities (Shangpliang, 2012)), providing wild vegetables, mushrooms, tender bamboo shoots and other NTFPs for consumption and sale. Different ethnic communities in Manipur highly depend on NTFPs by diversely using as many as 68 wild plant resources for food, medicine, income, and socio-cultural purposes (Konsam *et al.* 2016). A Study by Lynda Thoudam *et al.* (2022) of Thadou Kuki tribes in Manipur finds that among NTFPs, firewood is the main NTFP extracted in terms of livelihood and income while other edible NTFPs like medicinal plants, vegetables, etc are gathered solely for self-consumption. In every

state of North East India, the NTFPs collected are commonly sold in the market (Kaushik *et al.* 2020). The tribal women usually do the collection of forest products. Though tribal men assist women in collecting and bringing those home or market, men's role is not very significant (Mandal 2022). Much of the work done by women goes unrecognized because they generally work in the informal sector of the economy. Therefore, there requires much support in the economy's informal sector, where they could engage in petty trade such as collecting and selling Non-timber forest products (Parsuraman, 2016). Women commonly sell NTFPs collected in the market as they have better bargaining capability and are more patient than men (Mandal, 2022).

NTFPs contribute income which can improve livelihood security of women and help in fostering their economic empowerment. Women's economic empowerment is fundamental to enhancing and strengthening their economic and social status (Kassa, 2015).

The present study explores the purpose of tribal women's utilization of NTFPs in Tamenglong district of Manipur. The study seeks to identify the factors influencing the economic contribution of tribal women through Non-Timber Forest Products.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present study was carried out as an exploratory study in the three villages of the three sub-divisions of Tamenglong district, namely Mandu village, Langmei (Chiang) village, and Kahulong village, based on forest accessibility and availability of Non-Timber Forest Products. The villages are selected from Zeme, Liangmei and Rongmei dominated villages giving due importance to their size and location (Zeme, Liangmei and Rongmei are the major tribes in the study area). Old Mandu village which is a zeme tribe dominated village was selected from Tousem sub-division of Tamenglong District, Langmei (Chiang) village which is a Liangmei tribe dominated village was selected from Tamei sub-division of Tamenglong district and Kahulong village which is a Rongmei tribe village was selected from Tamenglong Sub-division of Tamenglong district. One women respondent was chosen from each household in the selected villages. The respondents selected were women from the three

villages taking the most active role in economic and non-economic activities in their households. The data for this study were collected from April 2021 to September 2021. A total of 350 women respondents were interviewed using the personal interview method with the help of a pre-structured interview schedule. Out of the total studied population, 207 respondents who were engaged in the collection of NTFPs were considered for data analysis. The non-timber forest products considered for the study were the collection of wild edible vegetables, mushrooms, and other edible NTFPs shown in Table 1. The study did not consider the collection of non-edible Non-Timber forest products such as fuel wood, bamboo and cane.

**Table 1:** Non-Timber Forest Products

| Non-Timber Forest Products Items |                           | Part Used       | Use of Non-Timber Forest Products |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------|-----------------------------------|
| Wild Vegetables                  | Gan Kariak                | Leaf            | Food                              |
|                                  | Ganluak                   | Leaf            | Food                              |
|                                  | Ngek (Tender Banana Stem) | Stem            | Food                              |
|                                  | Haotut(Banana Blossom)    | Blossom         | Food                              |
|                                  | Gan Makhian               | Leaf and fruits | Food                              |
|                                  | Nrinathai                 | Stem and flower | Food                              |
|                                  | Alai                      | Leaf            | Food                              |
|                                  | Gansuning                 | Leaf            | Food                              |
|                                  | Gandiak                   | Leaf            | Food                              |
|                                  | Gandian                   | Leaf            | Food                              |
| Wild Mushroom                    | Duijeng Gansu             | Leafy           | Food                              |
|                                  | Hao paruai                | Leaf            | Food                              |
|                                  | Pantan                    | Whole part      | Food                              |
|                                  | Panjang                   | Whole part      | Food                              |
|                                  | Sinukuanpan               | Whole part      | Food                              |
|                                  | Pan nei                   | Whole part      | Food                              |
|                                  | Pon tam                   | Whole part      | Food                              |
|                                  | Ponloi                    | Whole part      | Food                              |
|                                  | Khuaithikpan              | Whole part      | Food                              |
|                                  | Guaimuang-phunpon         | Whole part      | Food                              |
|                                  | Mpiupon                   | Whole part      | Food                              |
|                                  | Panlu                     | Whole part      | Food                              |
|                                  | Mpungpan                  | Whole part      | Food                              |

|                        |              |             |                          |
|------------------------|--------------|-------------|--------------------------|
| Bamboo Shoot           | Nriangthun   | Whole part  | Food                     |
|                        | Mothun       | Whole part  | Food                     |
|                        | Mpei Thun    | Whole part  | Food                     |
|                        | Mpem Thun    | Whole part  | Food                     |
|                        | Nchi Thun    | Whole part  | Food                     |
|                        | Pui Thun     | Whole part  | Food                     |
|                        | Go sei Thun  | Whole part  | Food                     |
|                        | Sinaipi Thun | Whole part  | Food                     |
|                        | Goriu Thun   | Whole part  | Food                     |
|                        | Panki Thun   | Whole part  | Food                     |
| Sem Pagu               |              | Root        | Spice                    |
| Tamu(Sumac)            |              | Fruits      | Medicine, Spice and Food |
| Lemphiak (Broom Grass) |              | Broom grass | Sweeping Broom           |

*Source: Author's Field Survey, 2021 (April to September).*

## ANALYTICAL METHOD

The data collected were analyzed using the econometric model, Binary Logistic regression. Before carrying out the binary logistic regression, the multicollinearity between the variables was tested and addressed.

### Binary Logistic Regression

The study used Binary Logistic regression analysis to assess the purpose of collecting Non-Timber Forest Products by women. The study hypothesized the dependence on Non-Timber Forest Products for earning cash income to be the result of livelihood preferences made by the women, influenced by their socioeconomic and demographic factors.

The conceptual model of binary logistic regression for the present study can be expressed as:

$$\ln\left[\frac{\pi}{1-\pi}\right] = \alpha + \beta_1x_1 + \beta_2x_2 + \dots + \beta_kx_k$$

Or

$$\ln\left[\frac{\pi}{1-\pi}\right] = \alpha + \beta_1x_1 + \beta_2x_2 + \beta_3x_3 + \beta_4x_4 + \beta_5x_5 + \beta_6x_6 + \beta_7x_7 + \beta_8x_8 + \beta_9x_9$$

Where  $\pi$  is the probability of women earning cash income from Non-Timber Forest Products, and  $1-\pi$  is the probability of women not earning cash income from Non-Timber Forest Products,  $\beta_0$  is the

intercept term for each variable and  $\beta_1, \beta_2, \beta_3, \beta_4, \beta_5, \beta_6, \beta_7, \beta_8, \beta_9, \beta_{10}, \beta_{11}$  are the regression coefficients associated with the explanatory variables:

- ♦  $x_1$  (Respondent's Main Occupation),
- ♦  $x_2$  (Household Head's Main Occupation),
- ♦  $x_3$  (Total Respondent's Income),
- ♦  $x_4$  (Total Household Income),
- ♦  $x_5$  (Respondent's Age),
- ♦  $x_6$  (Respondent's Educational level)
- ♦  $x_7$  (Distance to market),
- ♦  $x_8$  (Marital status),
- ♦  $x_9$  (Household Size).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Women are the primary harvesters of non-timber forest products, significantly contributing to the livelihood status of their households. The study finds that 59.14 % of the women population in the

study area depend on non-timber forest products for both households' subsistence needs and cash income, and 40.86% do not depend on non-timber forest products (Table 2). Women respondents from Old Mandu village have the highest percentage (75.65%) engaging in collecting non-timber forest products (Table 2). In Langmei (Chiang) village, 61.30% of the women respondents depend on NTFPs (Table 2), while in Kahulong village, 39.63% of the women respondents depend on NTFPs (Table 2).

Women collect NTFPs for subsistence needs and cash income. Table 3 shows that women collecting NTFPs for subsistence needs only comprise 61.35 percent, and women collecting NTFPs for subsistence needs and cash income comprise 38.65 percent.

Table 4 reveals the NTFPs income earned by tribal women respondents in the study area. It is observed that 61.36% of the tribal women respondents do not

**Table 2:** Engagement in the collection and Utilization of NTFPs

| Collection of NTFPs       | Old Mandu Village     |         | Langmei<br>(Chiang) Village |         | Kahulong Village      |         | Total                 |         |
|---------------------------|-----------------------|---------|-----------------------------|---------|-----------------------|---------|-----------------------|---------|
|                           | Number of respondents | Percent | Number of respondents       | Percent | Number of respondents | Percent | Number of respondents | Percent |
| Not Engaged in Collection | 28                    | 24.35%  | 48                          | 38.70%  | 67                    | 60.36%  | 143                   | 40.86%  |
| Engaged in Collection     | 87                    | 75.65%  | 76                          | 61.30%  | 44                    | 39.63%  | 207                   | 59.14%  |
| Total                     | 115                   | 100.00% | 124                         | 100.00% | 111                   | 100.00% | 350                   | 100.00% |

*Source:* Author's Field Survey, 2021 (April to September).

**Table 3:** Purpose of NTFPs collection

| Purpose of NTFPs collection       | Number of respondents | Percent |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------|---------|
| Subsistence needs only            | 127                   | 61.35   |
| Subsistence needs and cash income | 80                    | 38.65   |
| Total                             | 207                   | 100.00  |

*Source:* Author's Field Survey, 2021 (April to September).

**Table 4:** Income Contribution of Non-Timber Forest Products

| NTFPs in terms of Subsistence needs and cash income annually | Kahulong village | Langmei<br>(Chiang) village | Old Mandu village | Total | Percentage |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------|-------|------------|
| No cash Income (Only for subsistence needs)                  | 7                | 33                          | 87                | 127   | 61.36%     |
| Below ₹ 20000                                                | 11               | 10                          | 0                 | 21    | 10.14%     |
| ₹ 20001 to ₹ 40000                                           | 12               | 5                           | 0                 | 17    | 8.21%      |
| ₹ 40001 and Above                                            | 14               | 28                          | 0                 | 42    | 20.29%     |
| Total                                                        | 44               | 76                          | 87                | 207   | 100.00%    |

*Source:* Author's Field Survey, 2021 (April-September).

earn cash income from the harvested NTFPs. Only 38.64% of the tribal women respondents earned cash income from the NTFPs collected, out of which 10.14% earned cash income of Below ₹ 20000 in a year, 8.21% earned cash income of ₹ 20001 to ₹ 40000 in a year and 20.29% earned cash income of Below ₹ 20000 in a year. The income from the NTFPs is very minimal despite the easy accessibility of NTFPs given the wide very dense forest cover in the study area.

**Table 5:** Number of days spent in the forest to collect NTFPs

| No. of days in a month | Kahulong village | Langmei (Chiang) Village | Old Mandu Village | Total |
|------------------------|------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|-------|
| 1                      | 0                | 1                        | 8                 | 9     |
| 2                      | 0                | 7                        | 16                | 23    |
| 3                      | 2                | 22                       | 26                | 50    |
| 4                      | 6                | 6                        | 28                | 40    |
| 5                      | 0                | 1                        | 1                 | 2     |
| 7                      | 0                | 2                        | 0                 | 2     |
| 8                      | 22               | 7                        | 6                 | 35    |
| 10                     | 0                | 1                        | 0                 | 1     |
| 12                     | 14               | 29                       | 1                 | 44    |
| 15                     | 0                | 0                        | 1                 | 1     |
| Total                  | 44               | 76                       | 87                | 207   |

**Source:** Author's Field Survey, 2021 (April-September).

Table 5 shows the number of days spent in the forest by the tribal women respondents in a month. It is observed from the table that Majority of the tribal women respondents from Old Mandu village went to the forest to collect NTFPs for less than 5 days in a month which is comparatively low compared to Kahulong village and Langmei (Chiang village).

The present study used Binary Logistic Regression to analyze whether the socioeconomic characteristics of the women respondents influence the likelihood of depending on non-timber forest products to earn cash income. We have a categorical dependent variable: whether the women respondent engaging in the collection of NTFPs are earning cash income or not: (i) women earning cash income from Non-Timber Forest Products(ii) women not earning cash income from NTFPs. For independent variables, the study used continuous and categorical variables such as the respondent's main occupation, head's main occupation, respondent's total income, total

household income, respondent's age, respondent's educational level, distance to market, respondent's marital status, and household size.

Table 4 shows the coefficients and odds ratios of binary logistic regression. As presented in Table 4, the logistic regression result showed that the Respondent's Main occupation, Total Household Income, Respondent's Age, Respondent Educational Level and Distance to Market made a statistically significant contribution in influencing women to utilize NTFPs for subsistence needs and earn cash income, whereas Head's Main Occupation, Respondent's Total income, Marital Status and Household Size were not statistically significant.

Taking the Respondent's main occupation in the agricultural sector as a reference category, the analysis found that the likelihood of women earning cash income among women with main occupation in the non-agricultural sector was less likely to earn cash income from NTFPs than those women with main occupation in the agricultural sector. This finding was statistically significant, with a p-value less than 5%. Women in non-agricultural sectors have better alternative income opportunities and thus depend on NTFPs for subsistence needs only.

Total Household Income had a statistically significant negative association with women's purpose of engagement in NTFPs with a p-value less than 1%. The result of our study suggests that as Total Household Income increases, the tendency of women to engage in the collection of NTFPs for cash income reduces in the study area because women with better off-farm activities were less dependent on NTFPs for cash income due to higher income opportunities from their other livelihood activities (Table 6). In other words, the negative association between Total Household Income and women's purpose of engagement in NTFPs indicates that if Total Household Income increases, women will be less reliant on NTFPs for earning cash income.

The coefficient of the Respondent's age was negative, showing a negative association with the purpose of women's engagement in collecting NTFPs and was statistically significant at a p-value less than 5 %. The result of the study indicated that as age increases, the likelihood of women engaging in the collection of NTFPs for cash income decreases because one has to be active to be involved in the collection of



**Table 6:** Factors influencing tribal women to earn cash income from NTFPs

| Socio-economic Variables                                     | Coefficient   | Odd Ratio    | P>z   |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|--------------|-------|
| Respondent Main Occupation (Agricultural Sector-Reference)   | -2.044117**   | 0.1294944**  | 0.031 |
| Non-Agricultural Sector                                      |               |              |       |
| Head Main Occupation (Agricultural Sector-Reference)         | 0.2445642     | 1.277065     | 0.706 |
| Non-Agricultural Sector                                      |               |              |       |
| Respondent Total Income                                      | -3.53E-07     | 0.9999996    | 0.961 |
| Total Household Income                                       | -3.12E-06***  | 0.9999969*** | 0.009 |
| Respondent's Age                                             | -0.0555652**  | 0.9459504**  | 0.036 |
| <b>Respondent's Educational Level (Illiterate-Reference)</b> |               |              |       |
| Below Secondary Level                                        | -0.3681566    | 0.6920088    | 0.571 |
| Secondary level and Above                                    | -1.796862**   | 0.1658184**  | 0.052 |
| Distance to Market                                           | -0.9967236*** | 0.3690867*** | 0.001 |
| Respondent's Marital Status                                  | -0.1570066    | 0.8546984    | 0.844 |
| Household Size                                               | -0.0309993    | 0.9694763    | 0.782 |
| Constant                                                     | 10.08345      | 23943.5      | 0.000 |

Number of Observation = 207, Log-likelihood = -51.911989, Pseudo R Square = 0.6241, Chi Square = 172.37, Significance level \*\*\* ( $p < 0.01$ ), \*\* ( $p < 0.05$ ), \* ( $p < 0.1$ )

**Source:** Authors' Field Survey, 2021 (April-September).

NTFPs. Thus, older women were discouraged from engaging in the collection of NTFPs for earning cash income. Women's engagement in collecting Non-Timber Forest Products for earning cash income was inversely associated with age.

The educational level had a statistically significant negative impact on the purpose of women's engagement in collecting NTFPs. The odds of women who were literate but below secondary level were 31 % (Odds Ratio = 0.6920088) less likely than those who were illiterate. Also, the odds of women who have attained educational level secondary and above were 84% (Odds Ratio = 0.1658184) less likely to earn cash income from NTFPs than women illiterates. This finding is statistically significant at a p-value of less than 5%. A plausible reason might be that with a higher level of education, the opportunities for economic alternatives increase, thus limiting their engagement in collecting NTFPs to earn cash income. Women with higher educational levels tend to utilize NTFPs for subsistence needs only.

Distance to the market had a statistically significant negative association with women's engagement in collecting NTFPs for cash income. The farther the distance from the market, the lesser the women engaging in collecting NTFPS for cash income. Most

of the wild vegetables, mushrooms and bamboo shoots are perishable, which has made women who live far from the market reluctant to risk going and selling the products in the market. Also, the remoteness and isolation of the village have resulted in relatively high transport costs, given that the prices of the products are relatively low, thus discouraging women who live far from the market from utilizing NTFPs to earn cash income by going to the distant market. They eventually utilize NTFPs for subsistence needs only.

## CONCLUSION

Forest resources are essential to the tribal communities' livelihood activities, particularly in the forest fringe area. Women harvest NTFPs for household consumption and for earning cash income. The study determines the purpose of women's utilization of NTFPs and identifies the factors influencing the women's purpose of collecting NTFPs. The study finds that more than half of the women study population in the area (59.14%) are collecting NTFPs. Women collecting NTFPs for subsistence needs only comprise 61.35 percent, and women collecting NTFPs for subsistence needs and cash income comprise 38.65 percent. The study suggests government intervention in the market price of NTFPs by empowering the harvesters of the

NTFPs with enough knowledge and information on the market value of the NTFPs for a better return of income. The study finds that “Distance to Market” is an important deciding factor for women to earn cash income from NTFPs. Women staying nearer to the market are more likely to earn cash income from NTFPs than those who live far from the market. Empowering women through NTFPs activities can create significant opportunities for women in income generating (Kassa, 2015). Therefore the study suggests the need for the government and non-government(NGOs) institutions’ interventions to initiate training and capacity building for the tribal women, such as value-added production techniques and vegetable preservation techniques through Self-help Groups or women’s organizations at the village level to bring more women into the market despite the long market distance resulting to tribal women earning cash income from NTFPs regardless of the far distance to market from their home.

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