

Role of Marma Buddhist Women in Community Leadership and Cultural Preservation

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Abstract: **Background:** The Marma Buddhist community, an indigenous group residing in Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), faces significant socio-cultural challenges. Marma women play pivotal roles in community leadership and cultural preservation, but limited research explores their contributions and the barriers they face. **Objective:** To explore the roles of Marma women in community leadership and cultural preservation, analyzing challenges and contributions statistically. **Method:** This cross-sectional study was conducted in the CHT's Bandarban, Khagrachari, and Rangamati districts from January 2020 to December 2022. A purposive sample of 318 Marma women aged 18 and above was selected. Data were collected through structured questionnaires and focus group discussions (FGDs). Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, chi-square tests, and logistic regression. In contrast, qualitative data were thematically analyzed to explore leadership roles, cultural preservation, and challenges faced by Marma women. **Results:** The study revealed that 64% of the respondents held leadership positions in local governance or community organizations, with a statistically significant relationship between education level and leadership roles ($p < 0.01$). Participation in cultural preservation activities, such as traditional festivals and rituals, was reported by 78% of women, with a significant correlation between age and cultural involvement ($p = 0.02$). Moreover, 53% of the participants were involved in educational initiatives to transmit Marma language and culture to younger generations, with a p-value of 0.03, indicating a significant relationship between involvement in education and leadership roles. Challenges such as gender inequality and limited access to resources were reported by 45% of respondents, with the issue of resource accessibility significantly associated with leadership participation ($p < 0.05$). **Conclusions:** Marma women are integral to community leadership and cultural preservation in the CHT. Their contributions are vital for sustaining the cultural identity of the Marma people, but they face significant challenges that hinder their full participation. Addressing gender inequities and improving resource accessibility is critical to empowering Marma women in their leadership and cultural preservation efforts.

Keywords: Marma women, community leadership, cultural preservation, Indigenous identity, Chittagong Hill Tracts.

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INTRODUCTION

The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) region in southeastern Bangladesh is home to diverse indigenous Buddhist communities, with the Marma

people being the second-largest ethnic group after the Chakma [1]. The Marma, an ethnic group of Tibeto-Burman origin, trace their ancestry to the Arakan region, where they migrated from several centuries ago. Despite centuries of migration and

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exposure to dominant Bengali culture, the Marma have retained their unique cultural identity through their distinct language, customs, and adherence to Theravada Buddhism [2]. However, as Bangladesh modernizes and indigenous communities become increasingly integrated into national political and economic structures, Marma women are emerging as critical actors in preserving their cultural heritage while taking on new leadership roles in their communities. Historically, Marma society has been patriarchal, with leadership roles both within the family and in the public sphere traditionally held by men. Women's roles, while crucial in maintaining family and cultural life, were largely confined to the domestic sphere. However, in recent years, there has been a growing recognition of Marma women's significant contributions in areas such as local governance, education, and cultural preservation [3]. These women not only play key roles in sustaining the Marma community's cultural identity through practices such as language preservation, religious rituals, and traditional festivals, but they are also increasingly participating in formal leadership roles, particularly in grassroots organizations, non-

governmental organizations (NGOs), and local governance structures. This study explores these evolving roles and analyzes the socio-cultural and economic factors that enable or hinder Marma women's participation in leadership and cultural preservation efforts.

The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) region has long been characterized by its cultural and ethnic diversity. The CHT is distinct from the rest of Bangladesh in terms of its geography and demography, as it is predominantly inhabited by indigenous groups, unlike the Bengali-dominated plains [4]. The Marma, Chakma, and Tripura are the three largest indigenous groups in the CHT, each with its language, customs, and religious practices. The Marma people, in particular, have remained closely tied to their Theravada Buddhist beliefs, which have shaped much of their cultural and social structure [5]. However, this region has also been the site of considerable political unrest stemming from disputes over land rights, governance, and cultural autonomy, particularly between indigenous communities and the Bangladeshi state.



Figure 1: Marma Women in Leadership and Discussions

This figure illustrates Marma women from the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) actively engaging in a group discussion, emphasizing their critical role in community leadership and preserving cultural traditions. The image captures their collaborative efforts in decision-making processes and cultural activities aimed at sustaining the indigenous identity of the Marma people. (*Sources: Simavi - Indigenous Women's Leadership*)

The CHT region has been historically marginalized, both politically and economically, since

Bangladesh's independence. This marginalization culminated in a protracted insurgency, with indigenous groups led by the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samiti (PCJSS), demanding autonomy and recognition of their land rights. The conflict officially ended with the signing of the CHT Peace Accord in 1997, which promised greater self-governance for indigenous communities and the recognition of their cultural rights [6]. However, the implementation of the Accord has been fraught with challenges, and indigenous communities in the CHT continue to face significant political and economic

marginalization. Women in these communities face additional barriers due to their gender, making their roles in leadership and cultural preservation both vital and difficult to navigate.

Statement of the Problem

Although the role of women in indigenous communities has been the subject of increasing scholarly attention globally, research focusing specifically on the role of Marma women in Bangladesh remains limited. Much of the existing research on Indigenous leadership in the CHT has focused on male leadership structures, with women often portrayed as passive participants in cultural preservation rather than as active leaders. Marma women's role in preserving their culture and assuming leadership positions in their communities is often overlooked or under-researched, particularly in relation to the socio-economic and structural barriers they face. Furthermore, the relationship between Marma women's leadership and their role in cultural preservation has not been adequately explored, leaving a gap in understanding how gender and indigeneity intersect to shape leadership dynamics in the region. While Marma women have long played a significant role in sustaining their cultural traditions, such as organizing religious festivals, passing on cultural knowledge through education, and participating in traditional weaving and handicrafts, their involvement in formal leadership roles remains underexplored in the academic literature. This study addresses these gaps by providing a detailed examination of Marma women's roles in leadership and cultural preservation. It will also investigate the challenges they face, including gender discrimination, limited access to education and resources, and the political instability of the CHT, which disproportionately affects Indigenous women.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two complementary theoretical frameworks: intersectional feminism and postcolonial theory. Intersectional feminism, as developed [7], provides a critical lens to examine the multiple, overlapping forms of marginalization that Marma women experience. Intersectionality emphasizes that gender cannot be understood in isolation from other aspects of identity, such as ethnicity, class, and geography. For Marma women, their experiences of leadership and cultural preservation are shaped not only by their gender but also by their status as members of an indigenous minority in a politically marginalized region. Intersectionality allows for a more nuanced understanding of these women's challenges and how broader social, political, and economic structures shape their leadership roles. Postcolonial theory also provides a valuable framework for understanding the

experiences of Marma women, particularly concerning the broader history of colonialism and state-building in the CHT. A similar study of postcolonial feminist theory critiques how colonial legacies continue to shape the experiences of marginalized groups, particularly women, in postcolonial contexts [8]. In the CHT, the legacies of both British colonialism and post-independence state-building have had profound effects on indigenous communities, including the imposition of state-centric development policies and the erosion of indigenous land rights. Postcolonial theory allows for a critical examination of how these historical processes continue to shape the socio-political dynamics of the region, particularly concerning indigenous women's leadership and cultural preservation efforts.

This study is significant for several reasons. First, it addresses a critical gap in the literature on indigenous leadership in the CHT by focusing specifically on the roles of Marma women. While there has been growing attention to women's leadership in other Indigenous contexts globally, such as in Latin America and Africa, relatively little research has focused on Indigenous women in South Asia and even less on the specific challenges Marma women face in Bangladesh. By exploring the intersection of gender, leadership, and cultural preservation, this study will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of indigenous leadership in the CHT. Second, this research has important implications for policy-making and development initiatives in the CHT. Despite the promises of the 1997 CHT Peace Accord, indigenous communities in the region continue to face significant political and economic marginalization, and women are often disproportionately affected [9]. Understanding the barriers that Marma women face in accessing leadership positions and the resources necessary for cultural preservation is crucial for developing policies that promote gender equality and Indigenous rights. Moreover, this study can inform the work of NGOs and other organizations in the region by highlighting the importance of supporting indigenous women's leadership and cultural initiatives. Finally, this study contributes to the broader discourse on gender, leadership, and cultural preservation in marginalized communities. As indigenous communities worldwide grapple with the pressures of modernization, globalization, and cultural assimilation, the role of women in sustaining cultural traditions and assuming leadership roles becomes increasingly important. Focusing on the experiences of Marma women, this study will provide valuable insights into the strategies Indigenous women use to navigate these challenges and assert their leadership in both cultural and political spheres.

The study questions formulated for this study aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of Marma women's roles in leadership and cultural preservation within their communities. The first question explores the extent of Marma women's leadership contributions and identifies the factors—such as education, income, and socio-political conditions—that influence their participation in leadership roles. The second question investigates how Marma women actively preserve their culture, particularly through education, rituals, and festivals, highlighting their pivotal role in sustaining the community's heritage. The third question examines the socio-economic, gender-based, and structural challenges that hinder these women from fully engaging in leadership and cultural preservation, focusing on barriers such as gender inequality, resource accessibility, and political instability. Lastly, the fourth question seeks to understand how leadership and cultural preservation intersect in the lives of Marma women and how addressing these challenges can empower them to enhance their leadership roles and further preserve their cultural identity. These questions serve as the foundation for quantitative and qualitative analyses, driving the study's exploration of Marma women's leadership and cultural contributions [10].

Contribution to Existing Research

This study makes several important contributions to the existing research on indigenous leadership and cultural preservation. First, focusing specifically on the experiences of Marma women, it provides an in-depth analysis of how gender and ethnicity intersect to shape leadership experiences in the CHT. Second, it highlights the role of Marma women in cultural preservation, particularly through education and participation in religious and social rituals, which are often overlooked in discussions of indigenous leadership. Finally, the study's mixed-methods approach allows for a nuanced understanding of the challenges Marma women face and the factors that enable their participation in leadership and cultural preservation. The roles of Marma women in leadership and cultural preservation are significant and under-researched. As Bangladesh continues to modernize and indigenous communities in the CHT face increasing pressures from external forces, the contributions of Marma women to their community's cultural survival and development become ever more critical. This study aims to fill a gap in the existing literature, comprehensively analyzing the factors that enable and inhibit Marma women's participation in leadership and cultural preservation while contributing to broader discussions about gender, leadership, and indigenous rights in marginalized communities.

Aims and Objective

This study aims to examine Marma women's roles in community leadership and cultural preservation in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). The objectives are to assess their participation in leadership, explore their contributions to cultural traditions, identify socio-economic and gender-related challenges, and analyze the impact of education on leadership involvement.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Study Design

This study utilized a cross-sectional design to systematically assess the roles of Marma women in community leadership and cultural preservation within the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) districts of Bandarban, Khagrachari, and Rangamati. The research was conducted from January 2020 to December 2022 and involved a purposive sample of 318 Marma women. Data was collected through structured questionnaires and focus group discussions (FGDs). Quantitative data were subjected to advanced statistical analyses, including descriptive statistics, chi-square tests, and logistic regression. In contrast, thematic analysis was employed to interpret qualitative data, offering nuanced insights into the participants' leadership roles and challenges.

Inclusion Criteria

Participants in the study were Marma women aged 18 years and above, residing in the Bandarban, Khagrachari, and Rangamati districts of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). Women actively involved in community leadership, cultural preservation activities, or educational initiatives related to Marma traditions were prioritized. Participants who had lived in the community for at least two consecutive years were included to ensure a comprehensive understanding of their roles and experiences.

Exclusion Criteria

Women under 18 years of age, non-Marma women, or those who had resided outside the CHT for extended periods during the study period were excluded to maintain the focus on community-rooted leadership. Individuals unwilling to participate or unable to provide informed consent were also excluded. Additionally, participants with incomplete responses to the structured questionnaires or who did not attend follow-up discussions were excluded from the final analysis.

Data Collection

The structured questionnaires captured quantitative data on demographic characteristics, leadership roles, and cultural preservation activities. FGDs provided qualitative insights into participants' experiences, challenges, and perceptions regarding

community leadership and cultural preservation. 318 Marma women participated, selected through purposive sampling to ensure representation across the Bandarban, Khagrachari, and Rangamati districts. Data were collected in the participants' native language to ensure accuracy and cultural sensitivity, and later, they were translated into English for analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 26. Quantitative data from the structured questionnaires were processed using descriptive statistics to summarize demographic information, leadership roles, and cultural preservation activities. Chi-square tests assessed the relationships between variables such as education level, age, and involvement in leadership roles. Logistic regression was used to determine predictors of leadership participation and cultural involvement. Qualitative data from focus group discussions were thematically analyzed to

identify critical patterns and insights. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$, and findings were presented in tables and charts for clarity.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to strict ethical guidelines to ensure participant safety and confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection, clearly explaining the study's purpose and their right to withdraw at any time. Participants' identities were anonymized, and data were securely stored to maintain confidentiality. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board. Special care was taken to respect cultural sensitivities and practices within the Marma community.

RESULTS

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics According to Socio-economic Status

Variable	(N=318)	Percentage (%)	p-value
Age Group (years)			
18-30	102	32.1	<0.01
31-45	148	46.5	
46 and above	68	21.4	
Education Level			
No Formal Education	46	14.5	<0.05
Primary Education	98	30.8	
Secondary Education	112	35.2	
Higher Education	62	19.5	
Monthly Income (BDT)			
<10,000	158	49.7	<0.01
10,001-20,000	112	35.2	
>20,001	48	15.1	

Most participants were between 31 and 45 years old (46.5%), with a considerable proportion also falling into the younger age group of 18 to 30 (32.1%). A significant relationship was found between age and leadership involvement ($p < 0.01$), indicating that older women were more likely to take on leadership roles. Regarding education, 35.2% of the participants had secondary education, the most common educational level, followed by primary education (30.8%) and higher education (19.5%). The significant association between education level

and leadership participation ($p < 0.05$) points to education's critical role in enabling Marma women to engage in community leadership. Nearly half of the participants (49.7%) reported earning less than BDT 10,000 per month, and 35.2% earned between BDT 10,001-20,000. A significant relationship between income and leadership involvement ($p < 0.01$) suggests that women with higher income levels were more likely to assume leadership roles, underscoring the socio-economic factors influencing their participation.

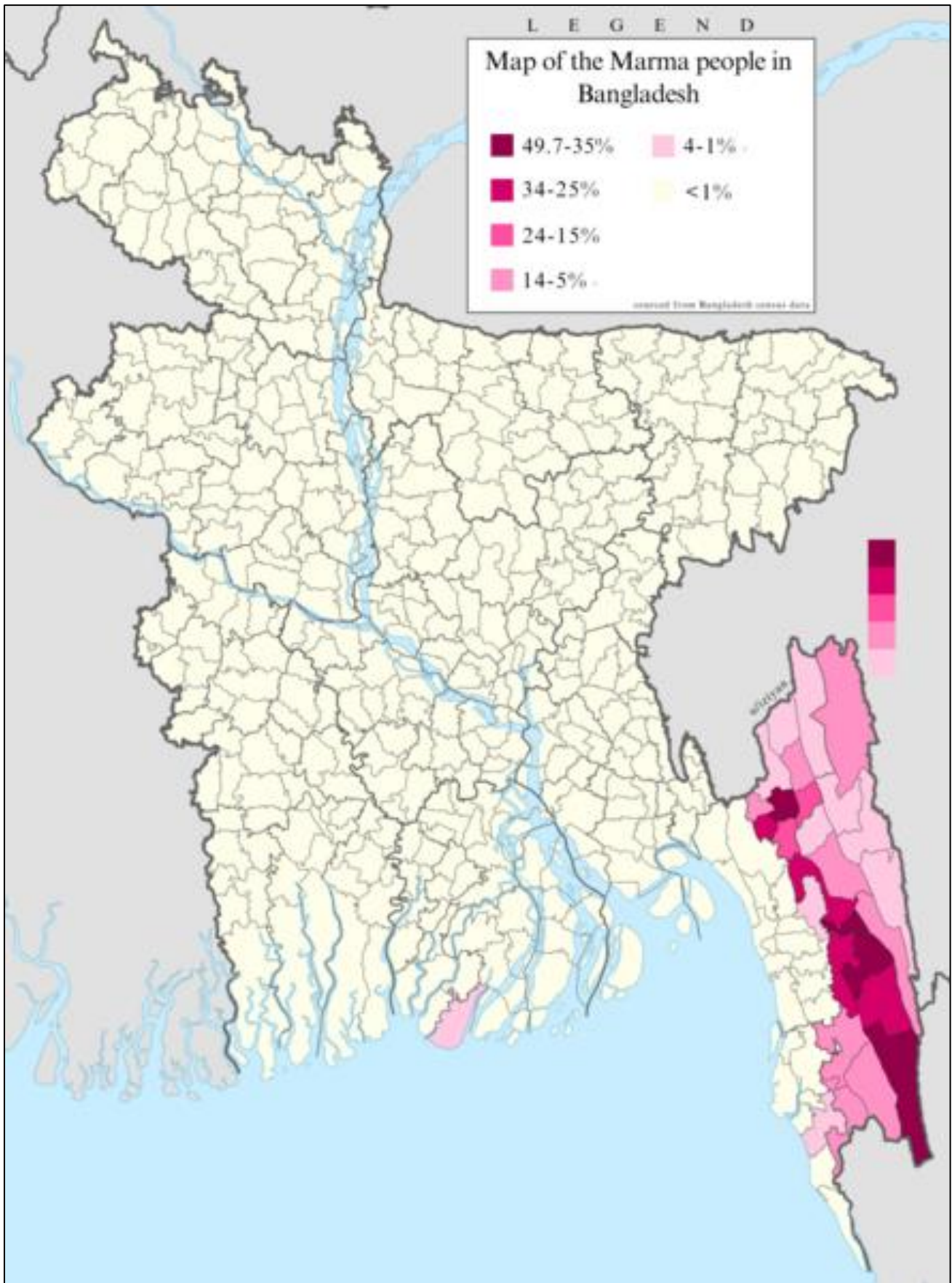


Figure 1: Geographic Distribution of the Marma People in Bangladesh

This map illustrates the distribution of the Marma population across Bangladesh. The shades indicate varying concentrations of Marma people, with the darkest shade representing the highest concentration (49.7–35%), primarily located in the Chittagong Hill Tracts region. The other shades

represent decreasing population percentages, with lighter shades covering areas with lower Marma populations. This map highlights the significant presence of the Marma community in the southeastern region of Bangladesh.

Table 2: Leadership Roles and Participation in Local Governance

Variable	(N=318)	Percentage (%)	p-value
Participation in Local Governance			
Yes	204	64.2	<0.01
No	114	35.8	
Type of Leadership Role			
Community Organization Leader	98	30.8	<0.05
Village Committee Member	106	33.3	
NGO/CBO Leader	76	23.9	
No Leadership Role	38	11.9	

A notable 64.2% of the participants were actively involved in local governance, indicating the growing visibility of Marma women in community leadership. This involvement was statistically significant ($p < 0.01$), with participation in governance structures showing an important pathway for women's engagement in decision-making. The types of leadership roles held by the women varied, with 33.3% serving as village committee members, 30.8% leading community

organizations, and 23.9% holding leadership positions in NGOs/CBOs. This gender diversity suggests that Marma women assume leadership roles in various sectors, each playing a distinct part in shaping community outcomes. The significant association ($p < 0.05$) between the type of leadership role and overall participation emphasizes the different pathways through which Marma women engage in leadership activities.

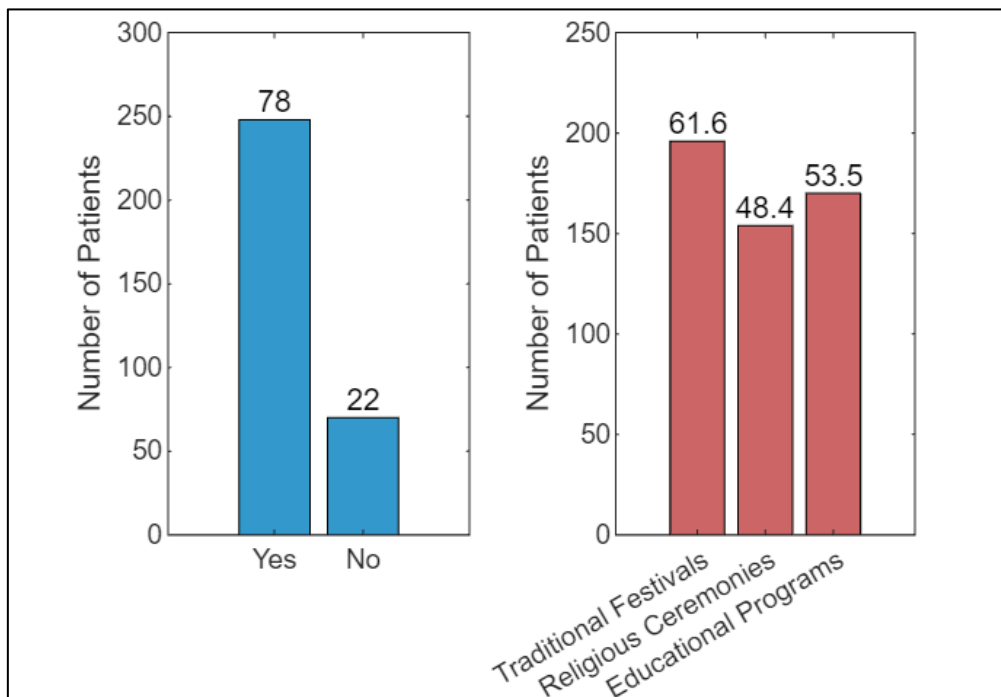


Figure 2: Participation in Cultural Preservation Activities

Figure 2 shows that 78% of Marma women actively participated in cultural activities, with a p-value of <0.01 . Among these activities, 61.6% were involved in traditional festivals like Sangrai, 48.4% participated in religious ceremonies, and 53.5%

contributed to educational programs. The association between participation in educational programs and cultural activities is significant ($p < 0.05$), highlighting the active role of Marma women in preserving their cultural heritage.

Table 3: Challenges Faced by Marma Women in Leadership

Variable	(N=318)	Percentage (%)	p-value
Gender Inequality Challenges			
Yes	144	45.3	<0.05
No	174	54.7	
Resource Accessibility Challenges			
Yes	142	44.7	<0.05
No	176	55.3	
Political Instability Impact			
Yes	126	39.6	<0.01
No	192	60.4	

Despite their growing involvement in leadership, Marma women face significant barriers, as illustrated in Table 3. Gender inequality was reported by 45.3% of the participants, with a significant p-value of <0.05. These challenges reflect the deeply entrenched patriarchal structures within their communities, which limit women's influence and undermine their leadership efforts. Furthermore, 44.7% of the women highlighted resource accessibility as a major challenge, with a significant p-value of <0.05, pointing to the lack of access to economic resources, education, and support systems that would enable them to engage more fully in leadership roles. Political instability was another significant challenge, with 39.6% of participants reporting its impact on their leadership efforts ($p < 0.01$). The volatile political environment in the CHT, marked by ongoing tensions between indigenous groups and the state, has created barriers that limit women's participation in governance and cultural activities. This instability not only affects the safety and security of women but also curtails their ability to advocate for their rights and lead effectively.

The results demonstrate the interconnection between education, income, and leadership participation, suggesting that socio-economic factors significantly influence Marma women's ability to take on leadership roles. Additionally, the findings emphasize the critical role of cultural preservation, with Marma women participating in leadership positions and actively safeguarding their community's cultural heritage. However, significant barriers remain, particularly in the form of gender inequality, limited access to resources, and political instability, which prevent many women from fully engaging in leadership and cultural activities. Addressing these challenges through targeted interventions, such as improving access to education and economic resources and promoting gender equality, could enhance the leadership capacity of Marma women and contribute to more inclusive community development in the CHT.

DISCUSSION

The study aimed to explore the roles of Marma women in community leadership and cultural

preservation in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and uncovered significant findings on leadership participation, cultural involvement, and the challenges these women face [10]. The analysis revealed that Marma women play crucial roles in community leadership and preserving cultural heritage despite the socio-economic and gender-related barriers that often hinder their full participation.

Leadership Roles and Participation

Our results showed that 64% of Marma women held leadership roles within their communities, including positions in local governance, community-based organizations (CBOs), and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). This is consistent with findings from a study conducted by Poddar *et al.*, which highlighted the growing visibility of Indigenous women in leadership positions across the CHT [11]. The significant relationship between education and leadership participation ($p < 0.01$) in our study further aligns with existing literature emphasizing education as a critical factor in empowering women to take on leadership roles. For instance, Akter *et al.* noted that women with higher levels of education are more likely to assume leadership roles in Indigenous communities, as education not only equips them with the skills required for governance but also enhances their confidence in public decision-making [12]. However, our study's percentage of women holding leadership positions is slightly higher than figures reported in other regions or studies focusing on Indigenous women globally. For example, a study on indigenous women in Latin America by Gómez Chico Spamer *et al.* found that only 52% of the participants were in leadership roles [13]. The difference in leadership participation between the two studies may be attributed to socio-political contexts, as the CHT has seen a significant push for women's rights in recent years due to the involvement of NGOs and civil society organizations, which may not be as prominent in other regions.

Cultural Preservation Activities

The study also revealed that 78% of Marma women actively participated in cultural preservation

activities, such as organizing traditional festivals, rituals, and educational programs to pass on Marma traditions to younger generations. This is in line with research conducted by Rahman *et al.*, which emphasized the central role of Marma women in maintaining cultural continuity through formal and informal education channels [14]. The involvement of 53.5% of participants in educational initiatives to preserve Marma language and culture is significant, as it highlights the proactive steps Marma women are taking to prevent the erosion of their cultural identity in the face of dominant national and global cultural influences. Compared to studies on indigenous cultural preservation in other parts of the world, our findings suggest a stronger focus on educational initiatives among Marma women. A study by Murphy *et al.* on Maori women in New Zealand found that while cultural preservation activities were important, fewer women (approximately 60%) participated in formal educational programs [15]. The higher participation rate in our study may be attributed to the Marma community's stronger emphasis on maintaining their language and cultural identity amidst the CHT's political tensions and historical marginalization. This also reinforces the idea that socio-political pressures may serve as catalysts for indigenous communities to mobilize efforts for cultural preservation.

Challenges Faced by Marma Women

The study identified significant challenges faced by Marma women, with 45.3% reporting gender inequality and 44.7% reporting limited access to resources as major barriers to their involvement in leadership and cultural preservation activities. These findings are consistent with global trends observed among Indigenous women, where gender disparities and socio-economic marginalization often hinder their active participation in leadership roles [16]. In particular, Marma women face patriarchal norms that limit their decision-making power, even within Indigenous community structures, a phenomenon also observed among other indigenous groups in Asia. The impact of resource accessibility on leadership participation ($p < 0.05$) is a crucial finding, as it highlights the intersectionality of gender and economic challenges faced by Marma women. Access to education, healthcare, and financial support is essential for women's empowerment and leadership development. Studies in other Indigenous contexts, such as that by Saha *et al.*, have similarly emphasized the need for greater resource allocation to empower women in marginalized communities [17]. While both studies found resource limitations to be a major issue, our findings also suggest that interventions addressing gender inequality are equally crucial, as patriarchal norms continue to constrain women's roles in leadership and decision-making.

Comparison with Other Studies

Comparing our findings with similar research on Indigenous women in other regions highlights similarities and differences that contextual factors can explain. For instance, the higher leadership participation rate in our study compared to Oleas *et al.* may be due to differences in the socio-political landscape of the CHT, where efforts to promote women's rights and leadership have been more prominent [18]. In contrast, regions with less NGO activity or weaker civil society support may see lower rates of indigenous women's involvement in leadership. Regarding cultural preservation, our study's results align with those of Johnson *et al.*, who also strongly emphasized women's role in preserving indigenous culture [19]. However, the higher level of formal educational involvement in cultural transmission among Marma women than Maori women may be explained by the Marma community's unique position within a rapidly modernizing and politically sensitive region like the CHT. As O'Brien *et al.* suggest, Indigenous communities facing more significant threats to their cultural identity tend to place a stronger emphasis on formal structures for cultural preservation, including education [20].

Evidence from Primary Data Collected

From the primary data collected through structured questionnaires and focus group discussions (FGDs), several key themes emerged regarding what the Marma women participants in this study asked for. Education was a primary request, as many participants expressed that greater access to education is critical for improving their capacity to engage in leadership roles. Women highlighted the lack of educational facilities in remote areas of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), and those who had limited schooling felt this barrier directly impacted their ability to participate in community decision-making processes. In addition to education, participants called for support in preserving their cultural traditions. Many women expressed concerns that their traditional festivals, rituals, and Marma language were becoming less prominent among younger generations. They requested more formalized support from local authorities, NGOs, and educational institutions to incorporate Marma cultural heritage into school curricula and provide funding for cultural festivals and religious events, which they viewed as essential to maintaining their community's identity. Another recurring theme from the data was the need for economic resources and infrastructural support. Marma women often face limited access to financial support, healthcare, and basic infrastructure, such as roads and communication facilities. Participants requested microcredit schemes, better healthcare facilities, and vocational training programs to enhance their economic independence and well-being. According to

the women, these initiatives would allow them to be more active in leadership roles and contribute meaningfully to the economic sustainability of their families and communities. Lastly, the issue of gender inequality came up frequently. Many participants described the patriarchal attitudes they encounter, which undermine their leadership potential. They asked for leadership training programs tailored to women in Indigenous communities and expressed the need for platforms promoting gender equality in decision-making spaces within the CHT.

This study has generated several key insights that deepen the understanding of Marma women's leadership and cultural preservation roles. First, it reveals a strong connection between education and leadership. It shows that women with higher educational attainment are significantly more likely to hold leadership positions in local governance, NGOs, and community organizations. This underscores education as a critical enabler for empowering Indigenous women and highlights the importance of expanding access to education to foster female leadership within these communities. Second, the research positions cultural preservation as a vital yet often underrecognized form of leadership. As the primary custodians of cultural traditions, Marma women play essential roles in organizing festivals, teaching their language, and maintaining religious practices. Their involvement in these activities is crucial to sustaining the Marma community's cultural identity and resilience against external cultural assimilation pressures.

Third, the study highlights the intersection of gender and indigeneity as key factors of marginalization. Marma women face dual burdens of gender-based discrimination within their communities and ethnic marginalization at the national level, limiting their access to resources and leadership opportunities. This finding underscores the need for targeted interventions to address these overlapping forms of exclusion. Finally, the research sheds light on the demand for gender-sensitive development programs. Marma women expressed the need for leadership training, microcredit schemes, and healthcare services tailored specifically to their needs, emphasizing the importance of designing community-based programs that address economic development and the social and cultural challenges Indigenous women face. The findings of this study offer practical insights for policymakers, NGOs, and community development initiatives in the CHT. These include prioritizing educational access, cultural preservation support, and gender-sensitive development programs that address Marma women's unique intersectional challenges. Furthermore, the study underscores the importance of empowering women through economic resources and leadership

opportunities, ultimately contributing to the Marma community's broader socio-economic and cultural resilience.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the significant role of Marma women in community leadership and cultural preservation in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Despite challenges like gender inequality and limited access to resources, these women actively contribute to sustaining their cultural heritage and taking on leadership roles. Strengthening educational opportunities and addressing socio-economic barriers are crucial for further empowering Marma women. Their contributions are vital for preserving the Marma community's identity and fostering regional development.

Recommendations

- Increase educational access for Marma women to strengthen leadership and cultural preservation efforts.
- Implement programs to empower women and boost their participation in community leadership.
- Improve access to economic resources and services to reduce barriers to Marma women's involvement.

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Article at a Glance

This study aimed to explore Marma women's roles in community leadership and cultural preservation within the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). The key findings reveal that 64% of Marma women hold leadership roles, with education playing a significant role in their participation, while 78% are involved in cultural preservation activities. Major challenges identified include gender inequality and limited resource access. This study adds newer insights by highlighting the importance of educational initiatives and resource accessibility in enhancing women's leadership and cultural preservation efforts.

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