

## Role of Marma Buddhist Women in Community Leadership and Cultural Preservation

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### Article History

Received: 04.10.2024

Accepted: 16.11.2024

Published: 22.11.2024

**Abstract:** The Marma buddhist community is an indigenous community living in Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) who are facing social and cultural difficulties. Although marma women are integral to community leadership and cultural preservation, little research exists documenting their contributions and challenges. Analyze roles, challenges and solutions of Marma women in community leadership and cultural preservation tasks. This cross-sectional study was carried out in the Bandarban, Khagrachari, and Rangamati districts of the CHT from January 2020 to December 2022. A purposive sampling was used to select 318 Marma women aged 18 years and older. Abstract Global, national, and local regulatory frameworks aimed at public health have historically focused on alcohol distribution, availability, marketing, and consumption. Descriptive statistics, chi-square tests and logistic regression were used to analyze the quantitative data. In contrast qualitative data were thematically analyzed to identify Marma women's leadership roles, cultural preservation, and challenges. Results: Showed that 64% of the participants had leadership roles in their local government or community organizations, statistically significant correlation between educational limitation and leadership role ( $p < 0.01$ ). 78% of the women participated in cultural preservation activities (like traditional festivals and rituals), and there was a positive relationship between age and cultural participation ( $p = 0.02$ ). In addition, 53% of the participants were engaged in educational activities to relay Marma language and cultures to younger generations, and the relationship with education and leadership roles was significant ( $p$  value = 0.03). 45% reported challenges including gender inequality and limited access to resources, with resource accessibility notably related to leadership participation ( $p < 0.05$ ). Conclusions: Marma women are playing an indispensable role in community leadership and cultural conservation in the CHT. Their contributions are thus essential for the cultural continuity of the Marma people, yet they encounter strong forces that inhibit their participation in this respect. Fostering gender equity and facilitating access to resources is essential for 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 Marma people are the second largest ethnic group (following the Chakma) among the diverse indigenous Buddhist communities in the

Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) region of southeastern Bangladesh [1]. The Marma, a Tibeto-Burman ethnic group, trace their roots to the Arakan region, whence they migrated centuries ago. Unlike other Buddhists in the Mekong region, particularly those in the central

**Citation:** Jyotiswi Chakma (2024). Role of Marma Buddhist Women in Community Leadership and Cultural Preservation. *Glob Acad J Humanit Soc Sci*; Vol-6, Iss-6 pp- 259-269.

plains facing the menace of Brahmanic culture, over the centuries of migration and the exposure to dominant Bengali culture, the Marma managed to retain their unique cultural identity through their distinctive language, customs, and their adherence to Theravada Buddhism [2]. However, as Bangladesh modernises and indigenous people become organisation-ally embedded into national political and economic structures, Marma women are becoming powerful agents navigating between protecting their culture and assuming political leadership roles in their communities. In traditional Marma society, the leading roles were assigned to men both in the family front as well as in the public space. Women had their parts, and they were vital in keeping family and cultural life, but that was restricted to the private home. Nevertheless, Marma women have played prominent roles in local governance, education, and cultural preservation in recent years [3]. Indeed, these women are pivotal in maintaining the Marma community's cultural identity through the practice of language, religion, and festivals; however, their involvement in leadership, especially at the grassroots, NGO, and

local governance levels, has been on the rise. In this regard, the present study seeks to investigate these transforming roles and diet with socio-cultural and economic enablers/impediments to leadership and cultural preservation by Marma women.

The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) region has historically been known for its cultural and ethnic diversity. The CHT is unique among the rest of Bangladesh due to its geography and demography, with indigenous groups dominating its population compared to various Bengali groups in the plains [4]. In CHT, the largest indigenous peoples are Marma, Chakma, and Tripura; each of these peoples has a language, custom, and religious practices. Much of Marma people culture and social structure is defined by their Theravada Buddhism beliefs that have kept close ranks around the Theravada throughout the period. However, this area has also witnessed significant political turmoil, driven by different 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*)

Since the independence of Bangladesh, the CHT region has faced historical marginalization both politically and economically. Such marginalisation resulted in a long-armed insurgency by the indigenous people led by the PCJSS (Parbatya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samiti), which called for autonomy and recognition of land rights. The conflict officially ended with the signing of the CHT Peace Accord in 1997, which granted the indigenous communities greater autonomy and acknowledged their cultural rights [6]. In the interim, the

implementation of the Accord has been rocky and the indigenous peoples of the CHT experience acute political and economic marginalisation. Because women from these communities already face more challenges just because they are women, being at the forefront of cultural preservation, and integrating culturally appropriate means to do so, is challenging and essential.

#### **Statement of the Problem**

While the role of women in indigenous communities worldwide has attracted increasing scholarly attention, there has been limited research on Marma women specifically, in Bangladesh. However, the existing literature on Indigenous leadership in the CHT has predominantly focused on male-led systems, with women frequently depicted as passive cultural preservers, rather than active leaders. The socio-economic and structural barriers faced by Marma women and their critical role in preserving their culture and establishing themselves

as leaders in their communities are comparatively under-researched. Moreover, how Marma women's leadership influences cultural preservation and the role of culture in women's leadership in the region have not been sufficiently examined, indicating a lack of understanding of the intersectionality between gender and indigeneity in terms of leadership in the region. Although Marma women have long been instrumental in sustaining their culture's traditions, including organizing and hosting religious festivals, education that passes on cultural knowledge, and crafting traditional textiles and handicrafts, lesser explored in the academic literature are Marma women's positive contributions in formal leadership roles such as village head or council member. This study attempts to fill these voids by exploring the intricate aspects of Marma women's contributions to leadership and culture preservation. The report will also examine the challenges they are facing, including gender discrimination, limited access to education and resources, and the political instability of the CHT, which particularly impacts Indigenous women.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is based on two complementing theoretical approaches: intersectional feminist and postcolonial theory. The Marma women in Bangladesh face intersectional subjugation of their lives; thus, this study utilized 'intersectional feminism' developed in [7] as a mode of analysis rationale. Intersectionality reminds us that gender does not exist in a vacuum and that it overlaps with other aspects of identity—like ethnicity, class, and geography. For Marma women, gender and their status as both indigenous minority and members of a politically marginalized region inform their experiences of leadership and cultural preservation. Intersectionality provides a lens through which to understand these women, their struggles and how large social, political and economic systems play out in their roles as leaders. In addition, postcolonial theory is a useful lens for understanding Marma women in relation to the longer history of colonialism and state-building in the CHT. Well established postcolonial theorists of the CHT such as Babu G. K., and Shamsul A problematize the narrativeness of tariq in relation to imperialism, colonialism, post-colonialism, and global capitalism. A related critique in postcolonial feminist theory investigates how colonial legacies interact with aspects of gender relations, class, and misogyny to reflect in the experiences of marginalized groups, especially women, in postcolonial contexts [8]. These diverse regional histories include the legacies of British colonialism and post-independence state-building in the CHT, with the imposition of state-centric development policies and erosion of indigenous land rights. This theory enables a critical analysis of the construction of ethnicity and gender, as well as of

cultural and political identity, and thus allows to understand better how these historical processes continue to impact the sociopolitical dynamics in the region, especially regarding the importance of indigenous women's leadership and their cultural preservation initiatives.

The significance of this study is manifold. First, it fills a significant gap in knowledge on indigenous leadership from July's work within the CHT, specifically examining the leadership roles of Marma women. Indigenous women elsewhere globally, such as in Latin America and Africa, have gained increasing attention, but there has been little focus on South Asian Indigenous women in the literature, and even less on the unique challenges of Marma women in Bangladesh. This research will provide a more nuanced perspective on the impact of gender on the leadership landscape of the CHT and the role of indigenous leadership in the preservation of cultural identity. 2. At policy level, this research has important implications for policy-making and development initiatives in the CHT. Women in the indigenous communities of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh face marginalisation in socioeconomic, political, cultural, and environmental dimensions [8]; this marginalisation has not abated despite measures promised through the 1997 CHT Peace Accord [9]. Therefore, understanding the factors that hinder Marma women from occupying leadership roles and the means of cultural maintenance is important for designing policies that foster gender equality and Indigenous rights. This study can also be relevant for NGOs and other organizations operating in the region, as it emphasizes the significance of promoting the agency of indigenous women and supporting cultural efforts. Finally, this study adds to the larger conversation around gender, leadership, and preservation of culture within marginalized communities. Indigenous women are the backbone of their communities, but they face significant challenges, as indigenous peoples in many countries struggle with the pressures of modernization, globalization, and cultural assimilation. Based on the experiences of Marma women, this research will offer insight into Indigenous women strategies to address such challenges and stand out their leadership in cultural and political domains.

Studies questions formulated for this study. The first question assesses the extent of Marma women's leadership contributions and identifies the factors, such as education, income and socio-political conditions, which trigger their participation in leadership role. The second question explores means used by Marma women to preserve their culture in the forms of education, ritual, and festival and continues with the importance of their active role in

preserving the community's culture. Through the third question on socio-economic, gender-based, and structural barriers to women engaging in leadership and cultural preservation, the study will examine systemic barriers as they relate to these women, addressing issues like gender inequality, capital accessibility, and political instability. The fourth question addresses how leadership and cultural preservation intersect for Marma women and how these challenges can empower those women to improve their leadership and cultural preservation. These questions guide the quantitative and qualitative analyses, framing the study of Marma women's leadership and cultural contributions [10].

### **Contribution to Existing Research**

This study Such findings render important contributions to the literature on indigenous leadership and cultural preservation. It advances our understanding of this phenomenon by, first, offering an in-depth analysis of the experiences of Marma women specifically, in order to highlight how gender and ethnicity intersect to create particular logics about the nature of leadership in the CHT context. Second, it emphasises the Marma women's role in cultural preservation, namely, through education and participation in religious and social rituals, which often get no mention when scholars discuss indigenous leadership. For one thing, the mixed-methods study design enables a deep understanding of the challenges facing Marma women, and the protective factors for their participation in leadership and cultural heritage. However, the role of Marma women in leadership and control of spiritual heritage is critically under-explored. The contributions of Marma women to the cultural survival and development of their community in the context of continuing modernization of Bangladesh and pressures from the outside world on indigenous communities in the CHT are therefore even more important. This study seeks to address a gap in the literature by providing an in-depth exploration of the supporting and challenging factors to the participation of Marma women in decision-making and cultural preservation processes, adding to wider discourses surrounding gender, leadership, and indigenous rights in marginalized groups.

### **Aims and Objective**

The study intends to explore the leadership role of Marma women in different community sectors and in cultural perpetuation in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). These objectives include evaluating their exercise of leadership, investigating their contributions to sustaining cultural traditions, discovering socio-economic and gender-related challenges, and examining the effects of education on leadership participation.

## **MATERIAL AND METHODS**

### **Study Design**

This included a cross-sectional study to rigorously examine the roles of Marma women in community leadership and cultural preservation in the three CHT districts (Bandarban, Khagrachari, and Rangamati). The study was conducted between January 2020 and December 2022 with a purposive sample of 318 Marma women. Structured questionnaires and focus group discussions (FGDs) were used to collect data. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, chi-square tests, and logistic regression. By contrast, thematic analysis was used to develop a nuanced understanding of qualitative data, relating to participants' leadership roles and challenges.

### **Inclusion Criteria**

Study participants were Marma women of 18 years of age and above, who were living in Bandarban, Khagrachari, and Rangamati districts of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). We focused on women who were involved in community leadership, cultural preservation, or educational efforts that pertained to Marma traditions. In order to gain a thorough perspective on the roles and experiences of the participants, only those who had resided in the community for an uninterrupted period of at least two years were included.

### **Exclusion Criteria**

Non-Marma women and women below 18 years of age, or those who had lived outside of the CHT for large parts of the study period were excluded to keep the focus on community-rooted leadership. People who did not provide informed consent or were otherwise unwilling or unable to participate were excluded. Also, participants with incomplete responses to the structured questionnaires or who missed follow-up discussions were excluded from the final analysis.

### **Data Collection**

Structured questionnaires collected quantitative data related to demographic information, leadership roles, and cultural preservation activities. FGDs enabled qualitative exploration of participants' experiences, challenges, and perceptions related to community leadership and cultural preservation. A total of 318 Marma women were included in the study on a purposive basis to cover the three eastern hill districts of Bandarban, Khagrachari, and Rangamati. To minimize inter-rater bias, data were collected in the native language of participants to assure cultural sensitivity and then translated to English during the analytic process.

### Data Analysis

Data were analyzed utilizing SPSS version 26. Data from the quantitative structured questionnaires were processed using descriptive statistics to describe demographic information, leadership roles, and cultural preservation activities. Chi-squares were performed to identify associations between education level, age, and engagement in leadership positions. Logic regression was applied to identify predictors of leadership participation and cultural involvement. The qualitative data from focus group discussions were thematically analyzed to highlight key themes and insights. Statistical significance was defined as  $p < 0.05$ , with results showing in tables and graphs for clarity.

### Ethical Considerations

This research was conducted in accordance with ethical principles based on the Declaration of Helsinki to protect participants. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants, detailing the focus and purposes of the study, and their right to withdraw at any time. To protect confidentiality, individuals were assigned pseudonyms and data were securely stored. Ethical considerations were approved by the appropriate IRB. They took special care in respecting the cultural sensitivities and practices of the Marma community.

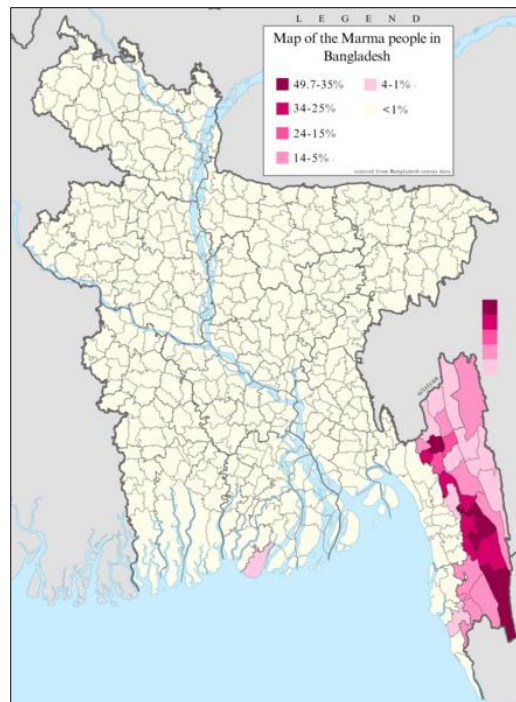
## RESULTS

**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	
Primary Education	98	30.8	<0.05
Secondary Education	112	35.2	
Higher Education	62	19.5	
Monthly Income (BDT)			
<10,000	158	49.7	
10,001-20,000	112	35.2	
>20,001	48	15.1	<0.01

Most of the participants were aged between 31 and 45 years, 46.5%, while a large number of participants were aged between 18 and 30 years, 32.1%. Recognizing such associations, older women took a larger leadership role than did younger women ( $p < 0.01$ ), which was statistically significant. In relation to education, 35.2% of participants had secondary education, which was the highest educational level, followed by primary education (30.8%) and higher education (19.5%). The important relationship ( $p < 0.05$ ) between education

level and participation in leadership suggests that education is the key variable enabling Marma women to participate in community leadership. As many as 49.7% of participants had an income of less than BDT 10,000 per month, and 35.2% had an income of BDT 10,001-20,000. A strong correlation ( $p < 0.01$ ) indicates that a relationship exists between income and leadership involvement—it suggests that women with higher income levels were more likely to assume roles of leadership, reflecting the socio-economic factors that underlie participation.



**Figure 1: Geographic Distribution of the Marma People in Bangladesh**

This map shows where the Marma population is around Bangladesh. The shades represent the different concentrations of Marma people, with the darkest shade indicating the highest percentages (49.7–35%) that are predominantly

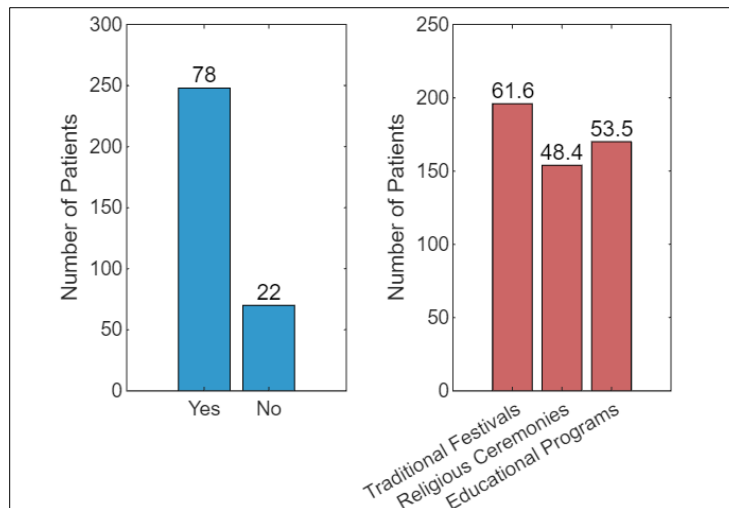
concentrated in the region of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The remaining colors show decreasing population percentages, with lighter colors indicating lower presence of Marma. This map shows the presence of the marma community in Bangladesh.

**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	
Village Committee Member	106	33.3	
NGO/CBO Leader	76	23.9	
No Leadership Role	38	11.9	<0.05

Among them, almost 64.2% participants were actively involved in local governance, reflecting increase presence of Marma women in the public domain. This was statistically significant ( $p < 0.01$ ) and participation in governance structures demonstrated this as a significant pathway for women's role in decision-making. The women's leadership roles include 33.3% village committee members, 30.8% community organization heads and

23.9% heads of NGOs/CBOs. This gender diversity indicates that women of Marma lead models in various sectors and play a different role in determining the result of each of the sectors.... The significant association ( $p < 0.05$ ) of type of leadership role and total participation is corroborating the diverse ways that Marma women engage in leadership activities.



**Figure 2: Participation in Cultural Preservation Activities**

This is shown in Figure 2. In these activities, 61.6% engaged in Sangrai and traditional festivals, 48.4% participated in religious ceremonies, and 53.5% had a role in education. Participating in

educational programs and cultural activities and their association has emerged as significant ( $p < 0.05$ ) and reflects the active [role of Marma women in preserving] 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	

Marma women are still facing challenges even though their participation in the leadership and decision-making process has increased over the years as represented in the table (3). The prevalence of gender inequality was found to be 45.3% with  $p < 0.05$ . These challenges highlight the deeply embedded patriarchal structures in their communities that restrict women's influence and undermine their leadership efforts. This is reinforced by 44.7% of the women pointing to resource access as a primary barrier, and a p-value of  $< 0.05$ , which suggest the lack of economic, educational, and support systems that could allow them to participate more fully in such leadership positions. Another serious risk during leadership was the political instability faced by around 39.6% of respondents ( $p < 0.01$ ). In line with this, the continued hostilities between the state and mini-state factions, as well as indigenous groups in the CHT with the state, has resulted in obstacles with regards to female participation in not only governance, but also cultural preservation activities in the region. This instability threatens the safety and security of women and is a

hindrance to their ability to fight for their rights and lead.

The findings highlight the interconnectedness of educational attainment, income, and involvement in leadership activities, and indicate that Marma women's leadership involvement is greatly shaped by socio-economic status. Also, the results highlight the importance of cultural preservation as Marma women take part in leaders and help maintain and protect their culture. But there are obstacles: Gender inequality; lack of resources; political instability — all of which keep many women from engaging fully in leadership and cultural activities. Some of the strategies to address these challenges, such as improving the access to education, economic means and various others, towards women empowerment, are important to enhance the future capability of Marma female leadership and community development in the CHT at large.

## DISCUSSION

Data were from this study on Marma community women leadership roles and cultural sustainability in the CHT and otherwise significant findings on leadership participation, cultural participation, and challenges faced were found [10]. That study found that despite socio-economic and gender barriers to full community participation, Marma women hold positions of community leadership and roles vital for cultural preservation.

### ***Roles and Participation in Leadership***

Of these, 64% of the Marma women occupied positions of leadership roles in their own communities such as local governance, and community-based organisation (CBOs) and non-governmental organisation (NGOs). An increase in Indigenous women in leadership roles across the CHT has also been identified across the system and communities [11]. Our results corroborates findings from previous literature, which has also shown education to be an important variable in terms of empowering women for leadership positions, with education showing a strong association to leadership participation in our results ( $p < 0.01$ ). For instance, Akter et al. observed that women with a greater level of education are more inclined to occupy leadership positions in Indigenous communities because education not only provides them with the skills needed to govern but also strengthens their self-confidence to engage in public decision-making [12]. Instead, the overall percentage of women leaders from our study is slightly higher than reported regional or global studies of Indigenous women. One-study about indigenous women from Latin America- by Gómez Chico Spamer et al. reported that only 52% of their participants were in leadership roles [13]. One of the possible explanations for the difference in participation of leadership of the two studies could be socio-political context, as a result of involvement of NGOs and civil society organizations in the CHT, there has been a momentum for women's movement in the last few years, which may not be the case for other regions.

### ***Activities for Cultural Preservation***

The results also demonstrated that 78% of Marma women were involved in cultural preservation activities like organizing traditional festivals, rituals, and educational programs to transmit Marma traditions to younger people. This corroborates with Rahman et al.'s study which highlighted the key role of Marma women in maintaining cultural continuity through formal and informal channels of education [14]. The fact that 53.5% of the participants are participating in educational efforts for preservation of Marma language and culture is significant for Marma women as this indicates their determination to resist the

erosion of the Marma cultural identity under pressure of larger national and international cultural forces. In studying the preservation of indigenous cultures across the globe, contemporary research is increasingly being grouped with that which looks at educational opportunities—a key finding within our data among Marma women. A study by Murphy et al. on Maori women in New Zealand noted that although activities for cultural preservation were significant, a lower proportion of women (around 60%) engaged in formal educational programs [15]. In contrast, the enhanced participation observed in our study may stem from the Marma community's necessarily greater prioritization of language and cultural survival given the socio-political tensions and historical marginalization experienced in the CHT. This also further encourages the hypothesis that socio-political pressures can act as an incentive for indigenous communities to organize cultural preservation efforts.

### ***Struggles of Marma Genus Girls***

The study found out that huge challenges faced by Marma women in the participation in leadership and cultural preservation activities, which, for the most part, is attributed to gender inequality (45.3%) and limited access to resources (44.7%). Such results are in line with trends seen globally, where many Indigenous women face gender inequities and socio-economic marginalisation, limiting their involvement in leadership positions [16]. Specifically, Marma women contend with patriarchal norms and structures that constrain their decision-making power—even within the structure of Indigenous communities—a phenomenon also seen among other indigenous groups across Asia. A key finding is the effect of resource access ( $p < 0.05$ ) on leadership participation, given the intersection of gender and economic barriers facing Marma women. Women leadership and active participation in society is not possible if there are no education, healthcare, and financial resources available. Studies on women in other Indigenous contexts, such as the one of Saha et al. have also highlighted the need for better resourced empowerment for women in disadvantaged communities [17]. Both studies identified limited resources as a key challenge, but our results also indicate that gender-sensitive interventions are just as important because rigid patriarchal power structures still impede women's participation at the higher levels of decision-making and also in leadership.

### ***Comparison with Other Studies***

Comparing our findings with similar research on Indigenous women in other regions reveals both similarities and differences that may be explained by contextual factors. As an example, our leadership participation rate was higher than in



Oleas et al. could be attributed to the socio-political dynamics of the CHT, where initiatives for women's rights and leadership are comparatively higher [18]. On the contrary, indigenous women may have the lowest, or hardly any, participation rate in leadership, in regions where civil society is weak, NGO sector practically non-existent or at least does not play a role in supporting civil society participation. In terms of culture preservation, the findings of our study are similar to those of Johnson et al., who also emphasized the strong role of women in preserving indigenous culture [19]. In contrast, the more engaged role undertaken by Marma women in formal educational cultural transmission compared to their Maori counterparts may be accounted for by the nature of the Marma community in the context of a contextually liquid and politically active area including the CHT. As O'Brien et al. However, as some studies [20] have suggested, Indigenous communities that are under greater pressure (from globalisation) to lose their cultural identity tend to focus more on formal structures for cultural preservation, for instance in terms of education.

***Instead, evidence is derived from data gathered from primary sources***

From the data primarily collected using structured questionnaires and focus group discussions (FGDs), which are extensively discussed, four main themes emerged on the nature of requests made by the Marma women participants in this study. Access to education was the foremost request, with many respondents claiming this would greatly improve their ability to lead. The women pointed out that even though several schools had been set up in these remote areas in the CHT, that did not guarantee education in line with CHT's socio-cultural and on-econometric backgrounds, and women with limited schooling felt that prevented them from confronting social issues and complications that faced decision making for their community. Participants also sought help in preserving their cultural traditions in addition to education. Some women mentioned that they were going to become fewer the next generation with less of traditional festivals, rituals and Marma language, disappearing. They also called for more formalized support from local authorities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and educational institutions to ensure the inclusion of Marma cultural heritage in school curricula — and funding for cultural festivals and religious events, which they saw as vital to preserving their community's identity. Economic resources and infrastructural support were also a recurring theme reiterated in the data. Due to growing systemic obstacles, Marma women are often denied financial aid, healthcare, basic infrastructures (such as roads, communication facilities). “I want microcredit schemes, better healthcare facilities, and vocational

training programs to improve my economic independence and well-being. The women said these initiatives would enable them to take on more active roles in leadership positions and make meaningful contributions to the economic sustainability of their families and communities. And finally, gender inequality was a recurring issue. Numerous participants described the patriarchal mindsets they are confronted with, which diminish their leadership prospects. They focused the need for leadership training programs specific to women in Indigenous communities and platforms for gender balanced decision making spaces within the CHT.

The study has offered insights that offers a more nuanced understanding of the role of female leadership in preservation in the Marma community. First, it shows a clear link between education and leadership. It says that starting with education level, its true also for sex that women who have educated men vs non educated men as their husbands and that will make a vast difference says that women who are going out can uplift themselves and local governance NGOs and community leaderships which is a great news for them. This highlights a significant enabling tool in empowering Indigenous women to take the lead, while being strengthened in their access to wider education. Second, the research frames cultural preservation as an essential but often overlooked form of leadership. As the main carriers of cultural heritage, Marma women are the festival organizers, the language teachers, the religious practitioners. Because any involvement in these activities is vital for sustaining the Marma community's cultural identity and resistance to the pressures of external culture assimilation.

The third point that the study highlights is that gender and indigeneity are key risk factors of marginalization. Marma women are subjected to gender discrimination within their ethnic community as well as ethnic marginalization at the national level, denying them access to resources as well as to leadership opportunities. This suggests the need for targeted interventions to address these intersecting modes of exclusion. And lastly, the research throws light on the need for gender sensitive development programmers. Interventions could include leadership training and microcredit schemes as well as community-based healthcare services designed specifically for Marma women. Community-based programs that target the social and cultural issues faced by Indigenous women are imperative for economic development. These results have important practical implications for policy-makers, non-governmental organizations and community development programmers in the CHT. Such initiatives are closely related to emphasizing accessibility to education opportunities, awareness

support in culture preservation, and the establishment of gender-sensitive development programs that address the multifaceted intersectional problems being confronted by Marma women. In addition, the research highlights the need for women to be empowered through economic resources and leadership positions, which enhances the larger Marma community's socio-economic and cultural resilience.

## CONCLUSION

Marma women play an important role in their community leadership and cultural preservation in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, as noted in this study of Marma women. Women in many countries resist factors such as gender inequality and limited access to resources to preserve their cultural and take on leadership roles. Disposing socio-economic barriers and strengthening educational opportunities would play a vital role to empower Marma women further. Indeed, their contributions are essential to the preservation of Marma community identity and promotion of regional development.

## Recommendations

- Strive for increased access to education for the Marma women to empower leadership and preserve the culture.
- Implement programs that encourage women and increases their involvement in community leadership.
- Developing economic services by improving access to economic resources will minimize the barriers to engagement of Marma women.

## Acknowledgment

We also want to thank the Marma women who participated in this study for sharing their experiences. We extend our special thanks to the local community leaders and organizations in Bandarban, Khagrachari, and Rangamati for their support during the entire research process. This work was commented on by our research team and was funded by several different organizations, for which we are grateful. Their support and collaboration were crucial for the successful conduct of this study.

## Article at a Glance

The aim of this study was to understand the roles of Marma women in community leadership and cultural preservation in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). About 64% of Marma women are engaged in leadership roles, education being a major factor for inclusion, and about 78% of Marma women are engaged in cultural preservation activities. Key challenges identified among them include gender inequity and restricted access to resources. This

study contributes new insights by emphasizing fruitful educational initiatives and resource accessibility that can amplify women's leadership and cultural preservation agency.

**Funding:** No funding sources

**Conflict of interest:** None declared

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