

**The Interface of Religion, Matriliney and Authority: A Case Study of Khasi Women in Meghalaya,
Northeast India**

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Abstract:

This research paper examines the status and role of Khasi matrilineal women within the Khasi-Jaiñtia Presbyterian Synod Sepngi, a religious institution in Meghalaya with a history spanning 179 years. It explores the complex intersection of matriliney, religion, patriarchy, and traditional authority, with a particular focus on the position of matrilineal Khasi women in Northeast India. While Khasi women in a matrilineal society may experience greater security compared to those in patrilineal systems, they continue to encounter systemic subordination and marginalisation. Despite the matrilineal structure of Khasi society, wherein lineage is traced through the maternal line, women remain significantly excluded from positions of authority within religious institutions. This research further interrogates the interaction between matriliney and institutional religion, critically analysing the representation of women's roles and gender dynamics within religious organisations.

Keywords: Gender, women, religious organisation, matriliney, authority, religion.

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I. Introduction

In academic discussions on gender and religion, a key issue is whether the object of worship and faith is conceptualised as feminine or masculine. Social interactions often categorise individuals based on biological sex; however, gender roles extend beyond biological differences, being shaped primarily by social, cultural, and historical contexts. Religious institutions frequently reflect these gendered constructs through specific rituals and cultural practices, which influence the organisation and structure of religious systems along gendered lines (Syiem, p. 106). This gendering of religious practices underscores the intersection of social norms and religious structures.

The Khasi Jaiñtia Presbyterian Church in Meghalaya, established in 1841 (Jyrwa, 1980; Jones, 2016; Majaw, 2003), is one of the region's oldest and largest Christian denominations. Despite its long-standing presence, the role and status of women within the Church remain marginalised, a paradox given Khasi society's matrilineal structure, where lineage is traced through the maternal line. The Church has not incorporated these matrilineal principles into its organisational framework, with women excluded from central religious roles and leadership positions, such as ministers or elders (Beckford & Demerath, p. 304). This discrepancy underscores the need for critical examination of gender roles within the Church's structure.

Despite significant advancements by Khasi Jaiñtia women in the 21st century, substantial barriers persist in achieving equality within religious and decision-making spheres. This ongoing inequality warrants comprehensive scholarly investigation. Although women's participation in the Khasi Jaiñtia Presbyterian Synod has increased since its inception, it remains essential to critically assess their involvement and influence, particularly in religious practices and decision-making processes. The intersection of gender and religion within this organisational context represents a crucial area for academic inquiry, highlighting the need to explore how gender dynamics shape religious authority and institutional decision-making (Passah, p. 91).

This paper critically examines the need for structural reform within the Khasi Jaiñtia Presbyterian Synod (KJPSS), emphasising the necessity to dismantle embedded sexist elements to prevent the ongoing marginalisation of women. Achieving gender equality remains an unmet objective within this religious institution. Although women's participation has grown since the Church's establishment, significant disparities persist. The Church operates a women's unit, *Jingiaseng Kynthei*, across all levels, from the Presbyterian Church of India (PCI) to local churches. This paper provides a comprehensive analysis of women's roles within this context, exploring whether they should accept or challenge the Church's gendered organisational structure.

The Welsh Presbyterian missionaries played a pivotal role in establishing the *Jingiaseng Kynthei* within the Presbyterian community, marking the first organised religious entity for Khasi Jaiñtia women. This initiative provided a crucial platform for women's spiritual engagement and served as a foundation for their broader societal participation. A notable contribution of the *Jingiaseng Kynthei* is the *Khawkham* (handful of rice collection) fund, introduced by *U Babu Joel Gathphoh*. Women set aside a small portion of rice twice daily, collected monthly, consecrated, and sold to support church projects, including school construction and staff salaries, highlighting women's economic and ecclesiastical agency (Passah, p. 98).

The *Jingiaseng Kynthei* fulfils various roles within the religious institution, including visiting church members' homes, providing counselling services, and managing departments addressing the spiritual and social needs of both genders. A significant portion of these responsibilities is voluntary, reflecting women's active commitment to the community. Despite their substantial contributions to church operations and court activities, women's involvement is constrained by limited autonomy. Their roles remain subordinate to the male-dominated church courts, reinforcing gendered power dynamics within the institution. This structural inequality raises critical questions about the distribution of religious authority and decision-making power within the ecclesiastical framework.

The arrival of Welsh Christian missionaries in the Khasi Jaiñtia Hills facilitated the establishment of a formal women's fellowship within the church, marking a significant development in the region's religious landscape. Despite this early inclusion, women were systematically excluded from local church committees and barred from election as elders. This exclusion persists despite the expansion of theological education through educational institutions like John Roberts Theological College (JRTC), which offers academic programs for women. Although women have access to theological education, they remain ineligible for ordination and pastoral roles, a disparity highlighted by both educated women and lay members expressing a strong desire for ecclesiastical recognition (Ghosh, 2015).

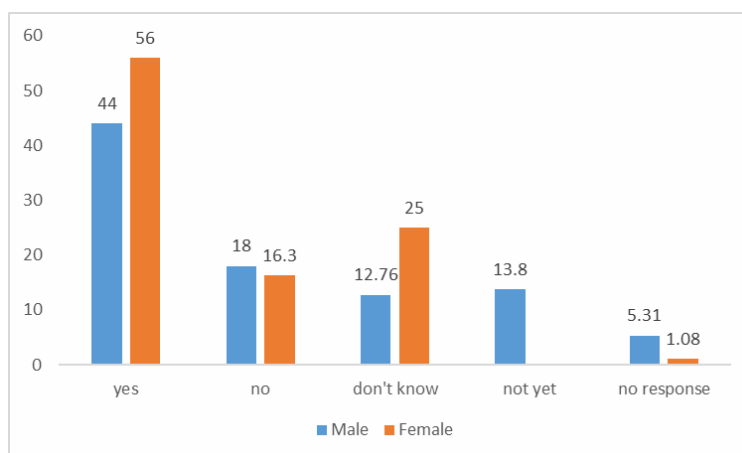
Despite the establishment of women's fellowships, the introduction of Christianity has not significantly enhanced women's authority or autonomy within church activities. Women's roles remain constrained by gendered expectations, as evidenced by fieldwork data indicating considerable dissatisfaction among women

regarding their limited roles. Many advocate for greater leadership opportunities, including positions as church elders or ministers. The All Khasi Theologically Trained Women Association (AKTTWA), comprising formally trained women, has expressed concerns over their exclusion from leadership. This persistent marginalisation underscores the need for further scholarly inquiry into the intersection of gender, authority, and ecclesiastical participation within the Presbyterian Church in Meghalaya.

This paper critically examines factors influencing the election of women as church elders and their appointment as ministers within the Presbyterian Church, supported by empirical analysis. Notably, in certain KJPSS districts, women are elected to local church roles, such as *Rangbah Balang* (church committee members), deemed permissible as these positions are temporary, typically limited to three-year terms, reducing re-election likelihood. Key leadership roles within the Presbyterian ecclesiastical structure are defined using masculine terminology, reinforcing exclusionary practices. The absence of women in ministerial and elder roles reflects entrenched gender biases within the church's organisational and theological structures, hindering gender equality in leadership.

Table 1

Respondents advocating for the ordination of women and greater inclusion in the authority structure of the KJPSS



The data presented reveals significant gender-based variation in perspectives on the ordination of women within the Khasi Jaintia Presbyterian Synod (KJPSS). A notable 44 per cent of male respondents expressed support for women's ordination, suggesting a moderate but growing openness to gender equality in ecclesiastical leadership. However, female respondents showed stronger support, with 56 per cent endorsing women's ordination, reflecting a more pronounced commitment to gender equality and empowerment within the Church. This discrepancy highlights the gendered nature of leadership aspirations, with women more likely to advocate for their inclusion in positions of authority.

While support for ordination is prevalent, opposition remains, particularly among 18 per cent of male respondents and 16.3 per cent of female respondents. This opposition is likely rooted in traditionalist views and doctrinal interpretations of gender roles within religious settings, reflecting broader societal and cultural biases. Additionally, 13.8 per cent of male respondents expressed hesitation, advocating for a gradual approach to

women's ordination, suggesting concerns about the readiness of both the church and its female candidates for such a transformative change.

Furthermore, 37.76 per cent of respondents which is a combination of both male and female respondents together (12.76 per cent and 12 per cent) regardless of gender, expressed uncertainty or a lack of knowledge on the topic, indicating insufficient engagement with the theological, social, and institutional implications of women's ordination. This uncertainty underscores the need for more comprehensive discussions on gender equality within the church, highlighting gaps in education and dialogue surrounding this issue.

The Welsh Presbyterian Assembly, parent body of the Khasi Jaiñtia Presbyterian Assembly (KJPA) and the PCI, demonstrates a progressive stance on gender inclusion by appointing women to leadership roles, including the esteemed position of Moderator. This role holds significant authority in doctrinal decisions, church policies, and governance. Conversely, the PCI struggles with women's ordination, reflecting a disconnect within the ecclesiastical tradition. Despite many women's theological qualifications, academic excellence, and sense of a 'divine calling' (Beckford & Demerath, p. 298), they are systematically denied ordination, revealing persistent gender-based barriers in PCI leadership. The Welsh Presbyterian Assembly's inclusive approach to leadership, exemplified by the ordination of women to influential roles, contrasts sharply with the PCI exclusion of women from ordained ministry. While the Welsh church embraces gender equality in decision-making processes, the PCI restricts women's full participation in ministry despite their theological education and grassroots involvement. This discrepancy highlights the tension between doctrinal conservatism, traditional gender roles, and evolving social dynamics. The PCI's exclusion of women reflects deeper theological and cultural assumptions, posing a significant barrier to gender equality and challenging the Presbyterian tradition to reconcile these disparities.

Despite women's active participation in church court deliberations, their decision-making capacity is limited by the male-dominated church hierarchy. Key leadership roles—such as Church Ministers (Pastors), Elders (*Tymmen Basan*), and Church Committee members (*Rangbah Balang*)—are exclusively reserved for men. The Church's patriarchal structure, characterised by a rigid clerical hierarchy and gendered power division, severely restricts women's access to authority. This systemic exclusion undermines women's agency, limiting their influence in theological and organisational discourse. Consequently, institutionalised marginalisation perpetuates gender inequality, hindering women's full participation in shaping the Church's governance and decision-making processes.

A patriarchal framework profoundly shapes the debate over women's ordination within the KJPSS. Many respondents justify excluding women from ordained ministry by citing religious doctrines, particularly the argument that 'Lord Jesus chose male disciples and apostles' (Dei & Bonsu, p. 36). Within the KJPSS ecclesiastical structure, patriarchal norms dominate, reserving leadership roles—such as Church Ministers (Pastors), Elders (*Tymmen Basan*), and Church Committee members (*Rangbah Balang*)—exclusively for men. The enduring influence of biblical teachings entrenched in the church community makes challenging or revising traditional interpretations of women's roles in ministry exceptionally difficult.

Despite women's acknowledged contributions to the church, traditional norms often supersede religious scriptures and church constitutions, shaping church governance through customs and conservative values. These traditions serve as both cultural anchors and mechanisms preserving gendered practices within ecclesiastical spaces. Reinforced by societal norms and the Khasi *Dorbar* system, which prioritises male authority and

leadership, this framework significantly obstructs the acceptance of women's ordination. Resistance to women's ordination stems from both theological and cultural conservatism, reflecting the community's commitment to preserving traditional gender roles within religious leadership (Ghosh, 2015).

Although the church constitution does not explicitly prohibit women's ordination, traditional norms, coupled with insufficient sensitisation and education significantly hinder its implementation. The intersection of patriarchal biblical interpretations and entrenched Khasi cultural norms shapes women's roles within the church, reinforcing gendered expectations in behavior and leadership. This dual framework perpetuates the perception that the exclusion of women from ordained leadership reflects Western cultural influences and also the authority prevailing in Khasi society's matrilineal values. Rev. Angel Jones noted that before the 1924 Constitution, women were not permitted to serve as church elders. Following its ratification, churches were granted the discretion to elect women to this role (Souvenir, p. 5). Although the PCI Constitution does not explicitly prohibit women's election as elders, no woman has been appointed to date. Similarly, despite women's increasing theological education, they are not appointed as church ministers on par with men (Ghosh, 2015). Instead, they primarily serve as missionary educators, counsellors, and theological faculty. This enduring gender disparity necessitates scholarly examination of its structural, cultural, and ecclesiastical implications.

The tension between traditional norms and religious forces within the Khasi community is exemplified by the proverb, *'When the hen crows, the world will come to an end'* (Passah, p. 92), which symbolises deep-seated resistance to altering traditional gender roles. This metaphor reflects the belief that women occupying male-dominated roles, such as ordained leadership within the church, disrupts the social order and is perceived as unnatural. Consequently, the prospect of women's ordination is viewed as a direct threat to established ecclesiastical and societal norms, underscoring the challenge of reconciling cultural tradition with evolving gender roles.

The interpretation of traditional proverbs and religious scriptures significantly shapes the status of women within the Khasi Church, reflecting a complex interplay between cultural customs, religious teachings, and societal expectations. The Khasi adage, *'When the hen crows, the world will come to an end,'* exemplifies the rigid, traditional perspectives that influence both cultural and ecclesiastical contexts. This worldview aligns with conservative biblical interpretations, such as 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-12, which have historically been used to justify the subordination of women in religious settings. These passages prescribe that women remain silent and submissive within church contexts, reinforcing the expectation that women occupy passive roles both in ecclesiastical and domestic spheres. In the Khasi Christian context, such interpretations perpetuate traditional gender norms, positioning women as subordinate to both male authority figures within the church and their husbands at home. This conservative reading of scripture underscores the church's reinforcement of patriarchal structures, limiting women's participation in leadership and decision-making processes (Dei & Bonsu, 2015; Syiem, p. 109). Consequently, these traditional norms and theological dynamics create substantial barriers to women's full participation in ecclesiastical leadership roles.

Literal interpretations of religious texts have historically reinforced traditional and theological barriers, limiting women's participation in Khasi Church leadership. Rooted in patriarchal ideologies, these interpretations marginalise women's roles, despite their theological training and qualifications, by maintaining gendered divisions of labour that favour male authority. However, contemporary theological discourse challenges these readings, advocating for women's inclusion in ordained ministry. Passages like Galatians 3:28,

which emphasises spiritual equality in Christ, and Romans 16:1, which acknowledges Phoebe as a deacon, are cited to support gender equality in church leadership, suggesting a need to reevaluate traditional interpretations (Dei & Bonsu, p. 42).

Proponents of women's ordination in the Khasi Church cite biblical passages as theological support for women's inclusion in ordained ministry and leadership roles. They argue that scriptures affirm women's equal standing before God, challenging traditional views that deem women unfit for leadership. This perspective calls for reinterpreting biblical texts through an egalitarian lens, considering historical context and evolving gender roles in contemporary Christianity. The debate over women's ordination reflects tensions between conservative scriptural interpretations and progressive calls for gender equality. Thus, scriptural interpretation significantly impacts women's access to ecclesiastical authority, influencing gender dynamics within the church.

The interpretation of religious scriptures is central to the discourse on women's ordination in the Khasi Church, intertwining theological legitimacy with broader issues of gender justice. In the KJPSS context, scriptures like 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-12 are cited to justify excluding women from leadership, prescribing silence and submission in religious settings. Such literal interpretations reinforce patriarchal structures, portraying women as unsuitable for roles like ordained ministers or church elders. This theological stance perpetuates gendered power dynamics, limiting women's participation in ecclesiastical leadership and reinforcing their subordinate roles within both religious and societal contexts.

A critical factor sustaining traditional gender roles in the KJPSS community is the unchallenged authority attributed to the Bible, perceived as an inerrant and ultimate source of divine truth. Any deviation from literal interpretations is viewed as a fundamental challenge to religious practice, reinforcing constraints on women's ecclesiastical leadership opportunities. Additionally, a significant lack of awareness regarding the church's constitutional provisions for women's ordination hinders progressive dialogue. This limited understanding perpetuates entrenched beliefs, restricting women's leadership participation and reinforcing gendered power dynamics within the church, thereby constraining efforts toward theological and institutional reform.

Resistance to change underscores the rigidity of traditional gender roles and the influential forces that sustain them. The perceived threat of women assuming leadership roles highlights the deep-rooted cultural and religious conservatism shaping gender perceptions within the church. Despite growing recognition of the need for gender equality in ecclesiastical structures, the pursuit of women's ordination remains hindered by historical, cultural, and doctrinal barriers. These entrenched obstacles continue to shape the discourse on women's participation in church leadership, reflecting the challenge of reconciling traditional beliefs with evolving calls for gender inclusivity within the ecclesiastical context.

The exclusion of women from permanent office bearer positions in the Khasi church is perpetuated by literal and decontextualised interpretations of religious scriptures. This approach reinforces gender inequality by neglecting the historical and cultural contexts of scriptural texts. Christianity in the Khasi Hills, influenced by Judaic traditions, upholds patriarchal values, systematically marginalising women within the Christian community. This patriarchal interpretation obstructs the indigenisation of Christianity, particularly concerning women's roles in ecclesiastical leadership. Despite the potential for more inclusive theological interpretations, women's exclusion from church leadership remains entrenched, rooted in both theological misinterpretations and cultural resistance to change (Syiem, p. 109).

The challenge of gender inequality in church leadership begins within Christian households, where rigid gender roles are defined and reinforced, extending into the ecclesiastical context. Reports indicate a persistent lack of gender sensitisation within the church, where gendered assumptions about women's roles remain largely unchallenged. Socialisation practices in Christian homes perpetuate traditional norms, framing women's roles as secondary or supportive. This situation is exacerbated by minimal efforts within the church to raise gender awareness or address institutional biases. Consequently, these dynamics contribute to the systematic exclusion of women from leadership roles within the church.

The introduction of Christianity to the Khasi hills brought significant cultural shifts, merging Judeo-Christian traditions with Western cultural influences, both shaped by Christian doctrines. Rather than liberating women, this fusion reinforced traditional gender norms, positioning women in subordinate roles. The Judeo-Christian tradition's depiction of the divine as male legitimises patriarchal structures within religious and social domains, reinforcing female subjugation. This theological gendering portrays male dominance as divinely ordained and culturally natural, restricting women to subordinate, auxiliary roles within the church. Consequently, Christian teachings in the Khasi context perpetuate gender inequality, both religiously and socially (Syiem, p. 109).

The intersection of Khasi society's matrilineal structure with the patriarchal nature of the church creates a complex dynamic where cultural and religious authorities shape gender expectations. Traditionally, Khasi society positions women at the centre of familial and social life. However, the church's patriarchal system, influenced by Western norms, generates tension between these systems. Khasi Christians have adopted church authority structures reflecting Western patriarchy, diverging from their matrilineal values. An in-depth analysis of traditional authority within Khasi society reveals its reinforcement through religious scriptures. The integration of religious texts with cultural customs dictates women's roles in the church, shaped by both societal conventions and theological endorsements. These roles reflect entrenched cultural and religious traditions, influenced by local practices and Western ideologies, which privilege male authority as divinely ordained and culturally normative. Consequently, theological, cultural, and social systems converge to sustain a gendered hierarchy, positioning women in subordinate roles and reinforcing the status quo. This framework significantly restricts women's opportunities to assume leadership and authority within the church (Beckford & Demerath, p. 303).

Religious doctrines concerning the ordination of women often reinforce patriarchal structures within religious institutions. Despite growing advocacy for women's inclusion in ordained ministry, their formal recognition as Church Ministers (CM) or Elders (CE) remains significantly limited, even with comprehensive theological education and professional preparation. This restriction is frequently justified by the presumption that women lack the necessary authority, leadership capacity, or doctrinal competence to perform these roles as effectively as men. Consequently, theological and institutional barriers hinder women's equitable participation in church leadership, perpetuating gender-based inequalities in religious practice and governance.

In Khasi society, the submission of Christian women to authority has historically been accepted due to the cultural influence of maternal males (maternal uncles) and husbands. The matrilineal system positions women centrally within the family, with inheritance through the maternal line and responsibility for maintaining family ties, fostering a sense of protection rather than exploitation. However, male authority prevails in both matrilineal and patriarchal contexts, as maternal uncles and husbands hold decision-making power over family

welfare. This duality reinforces women's subordination, framing their autonomy as contingent upon male oversight, despite their revered familial roles (Syiem, p. 109).

The dual structure of matriliney and patriarchal control in Khasi society creates a paradox where women are culturally revered yet constrained in decision-making domains. While matriliney positions women centrally within the family, male authority dominates key decisions, both domestically and socially. Traditional expectations and social norms restrict women's behavior, speech, and actions, limiting their personal identity development. Although Khasi women hold familial status, patriarchal dominance in public and ecclesiastical spheres subordinates their authority. This intersection of matrilineal inheritance and male control perpetuates a gendered hierarchy, restricting women's agency and participation in leadership roles (Syiem, p. 110).

The rigid interpretation of religious scriptures within the KJPSS context further entrenches gender inequality. Biblical texts such as 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-12 are cited to justify the exclusion of women from leadership roles, reinforcing the belief that women are unsuitable for positions like ordained ministers or church elders. This literal theological interpretation aligns with traditional cultural expectations, creating significant barriers to gender equality in both public and religious spheres. Additionally, limited awareness of the church's constitutional provisions permitting women's ordination exacerbates this issue, with theological conservatism and social inertia hindering critical engagement with doctrine and church law.

From a sociological perspective, the persistence of patriarchal authority within family and ecclesiastical contexts represents a complex challenge to both religious and social structures. This issue extends beyond theology, reflecting how religious institutions and cultural norms collaboratively sustain gendered power dynamics. The absence of critical engagement with these norms, coupled with a failure to acknowledge the church's constitutional provisions for women's ordination, reinforces traditional gender hierarchies. Consequently, these factors inhibit the development of a more inclusive understanding of gender roles within the Church, perpetuating exclusionary practices and limiting women's participation in ecclesiastical leadership and decision-making processes.

Addressing gender inequality within the KJPSS requires a sociological shift that challenges rigid interpretations of religious texts and re-evaluates cultural norms perpetuating gender disparities. This shift involves critically examining theological teachings and cultural practices to promote gender equality in both religious and social spheres. Inclusivity in ecclesiastical leadership would empower women, enhance community spiritual growth, and challenge patriarchal norms, fostering a more equitable society. The intersection of Khasi matriliney and religious authority raises critical questions about how matrilineal structures influence church authority and institutional frameworks, necessitating deeper sociological inquiry into gendered power dynamics within the KJPSS.

In the Khasi matrilineal system, the youngest daughter, or *Khatduh*, serves as the custodian of family property, a role of significant respect and responsibility. However, decision-making authority over familial matters resides with the maternal uncle, or *Kñi*, who oversees family affairs, including property management (Syiem, p. 114). This gendered division of labor positions women as central to family continuity and inheritance while limiting their decision-making power. This paradox reflects a form of 'partial liberation,' where Khasi women maintain symbolic authority in family life yet remain subordinate to male figures in governance and decision-making processes (Lyngdoh, p. 114).

The intersection of matriliney and religious institutions like the KJPSS presents complex challenges for Khasi women's leadership. Despite their prominent familial roles, Khasi women encounter significant barriers to religious authority due to entrenched patriarchal ideologies in both cultural and religious contexts. Field interviews reveal that the conservative mindset among Khasi men and women perpetuates the belief that, although women carry the clan name, they should not hold religious authority. This perspective reinforces gendered power dynamics, preventing Khasi women from accessing ecclesiastical leadership roles, where male authority remains predominant (Lyngdoh, p. 114).

The contrast between Khasi women's respected roles in familial and matrilineal contexts and their marginalisation in religious leadership highlights complex gendered power dynamics. While matriliney grants Khasi women social and economic autonomy—central to family continuity and property inheritance—this agency is limited by patriarchal structures governing public and religious life. This tension reflects broader sociological complexities between matrilineal egalitarianism and patriarchal dominance, especially in ecclesiastical settings. The KJPSS's reluctance to integrate women into leadership roles, reinforced by rigid scriptural interpretations and cultural traditions, underscores the need to critically examine how matriliney and patriarchy coexist in shaping gender and power relations.

The intersection of matrilineal kinship systems and patriarchal religious dynamics in the Khasi context necessitates a critical re-evaluation of gendered power structures. While matriliney grants Khasi women significant agency within familial and inheritance contexts, this autonomy is constrained by patriarchal religious institutions, such as the KJPSS. Religious doctrines, often influenced by patriarchal ideologies, limit women's participation in ecclesiastical leadership, reflecting a broader tension between cultural practices and religious authority. This 'partial liberation' of Khasi women—central in familial roles yet marginalised in religious leadership—requires thorough examination to understand gender dynamics across social and religious spheres. Empirical evidence indicates that traditional authority, deeply embedded in cultural norms, governs ecclesiastical structures within the KJPSS. Decision-making power in Church tribunals is reserved for male members, paralleling familial authority vested in maternal uncles (*Kñi*) despite women's central role in lineage and inheritance. Addressing this dichotomy calls for reform, promoting gender equality and enhancing women's leadership roles within religious institutions, fostering a more inclusive ecclesiastical environment (Kharchandy et al., p. 114).

Rational-legal authority, based on laws and formal regulations granting power through merit or election, theoretically allows women to hold leadership positions. However, within the KJPSS ecclesiastical structure, this authority is ineffective in advancing women's leadership. Although the Church's structure permits women's participation in governance, traditional gender roles constrain their roles, which remain marginal and mediated by male-dominated power structures. The KJPSS Constitution, as a rational-legal document, lacks explicit provisions on women's ordination or leadership roles, reflecting the Church's reluctance to integrate gender equality. This omission underscores the persistence of patriarchal norms and the slow pace of institutional reform in religious governance.

Within the KJPSS, some rural churches, such as those in Nongjri, Rangthong, and Pariong, permit women to serve on local church committees, primarily in administrative roles. However, this participation is limited to local governance and does not extend to higher ecclesiastical decision-making levels, restricting women's influence within the broader Church hierarchy (Ghosh, 2015). Women theologians and advocacy

groups, including the Presbyterian Women's Fellowship, have campaigned for greater inclusion, petitioning higher church courts for leadership roles and ordination. Despite these efforts, the Church's patriarchal structure resists change, reflecting the ongoing sociological challenge of integrating gender equality into religious governance.

From a sociological perspective, gender inequality in the KJPSS reflects the interplay between cultural and traditional norms, religious doctrines, and institutional power structures. While the matrilineal system grants Khasi women autonomy within the familial sphere, patriarchal norms dominate ecclesiastical leadership, revealing tension between cultural values and demands for gender equality. The KJPSS exemplifies the global challenge religious institutions face in balancing tradition with inclusivity. Institutional change is hindered by deeply rooted gender norms and the perception of power as divinely ordained or historically legitimate, making reforms toward gender equality resistant within religious organisations.

The persistence of traditional church thinking pattern and conservatism poses a significant barrier to gender equality within religious institutions, particularly in the KJPSS. Entrenched patriarchal structures shape the ecclesiastical landscape, limiting women's leadership roles and reflecting broader societal patterns of gendered power relations. Male-dominated authority structures within the Church mirror patriarchal systems in traditional power structures, such as the Khasi *Dorbar Shnongs* (local village councils) in Meghalaya, which institutionalise gender inequality. Empirical research indicates that *Dorbar Shnongs* contribute to the marginalisation of women by excluding them from legal and administrative roles, thereby limiting their participation in public spheres, including religious institutions. This exclusion reinforces gender disparities, maintaining women's absence from influential positions in both local governance and ecclesiastical leadership. Despite efforts to enhance female participation, these governance structures remain predominantly male-dominated, perpetuating gender inequality across both public and religious domains and highlighting the broader sociological challenge of integrating gender equality within traditional and religious institutions.

The exclusion of women from leadership roles in religious institutions, such as the Church, reflects broader societal patterns of gendered exclusion from decision-making processes, particularly at higher authority levels. Resistance to women's ordination, often framed theologically, is not solely male-driven. Many respondents, regardless of gender, express concern that female leadership—especially from the women's wing of the *Jingiaseng Kynthei*—could disrupt the established social and religious order. This perception challenges entrenched patriarchal norms internalised by both men and women. Some female members explicitly oppose women's ordination, highlighting the issue's complexity. This internalisation of patriarchy illustrates how gender ideologies are perpetuated by women themselves, who, socialised to accept male authority, may view themselves as naturally subordinate. Consequently, women often reinforce patriarchal systems, not through active opposition but through passive acceptance of subordination. This dynamic restricts women's agency and participation in religious and public spheres, underscoring the sociological challenge of overcoming deeply ingrained gender norms within institutional structures.

The sociological concept of hegemonic masculinity, as articulated by Raewyn Connell in *Masculinities* (1995), provides a valuable framework for understanding the internalisation of patriarchal norms by women. Hegemonic masculinity refers to dominant forms of masculinity that are sustained through cultural, social, and institutional practices, shaping gender relations beyond mere male imposition. Women may internalise this form of masculinity, accepting male authority as natural and legitimate, which can lead them to resist or oppose the

inclusion of women in leadership roles. This internalised subordination significantly impedes gender equality, as women complicity perpetuate patriarchal structures.

This dynamic aligns with broader patterns of gendered socialisation, where individuals are conditioned from an early age to conform to gender expectations through family, community, religion, and educational systems. These processes instil the belief that leadership and authority are male domains, while women occupy supportive roles. Over time, such norms become deeply embedded in the collective consciousness, complicating efforts to challenge and transform existing gender hierarchies. Intersectionality offers a critical framework for understanding the layered disadvantages Khasi women face within religious and social contexts. Gender inequality in Khasi society intersects with social identities such as class, age, and religion, shaping women's experiences of exclusion differently. For example, rural women, subject to more rigid traditional norms, may face greater barriers than their urban counterparts, who are exposed to more progressive gender norms. This intersectionality complicates Khasi women's exclusion from leadership roles in religious institutions and village councils.

Additionally, the internalisation of patriarchal values among women raises questions about the role of social capital in addressing gender inequality. Social capital—networks and social resources—can empower individuals to challenge norms. Women embedded within patriarchal structures often lack the social capital to resist these norms, while those connected to supportive networks, such as women's theological groups or the Presbyterian Women's Fellowship, may advocate for change. Nonetheless, persistent gendered power structures limit the effectiveness of these efforts.

Empirical research underscores the influence of entrenched gender norms within households on the limited leadership opportunities for Presbyterian women in the Church, such as roles as elders or ministers. Rooted in longstanding cultural and religious beliefs, this restriction reflects traditional gender roles that perceive women as ill-suited for the physical and logistical demands of church ministry, particularly in rural areas with geographically dispersed congregations. Male theologians argue that responsibilities such as extensive travel and managing multiple congregations exceed women's capabilities, compounded by biological factors like pregnancy and caregiving responsibilities. Notably, this perspective is shared by some female respondents, indicating the internalisation of patriarchal norms. In contrast, female theologians challenge these assumptions as male chauvinism, advocating for women's equal capabilities in intellectual, spiritual, and pastoral leadership. They call for an inclusive ecclesiastical approach, recognising women's contributions and advocating for gender equality in Church leadership roles.

Despite strong advocacy for gender equality by women within the Church, only a minority of male ministers support the ordination of women or collaboration with women as equals in leadership roles. This resistance reflects deeply entrenched patriarchal structures dominating both ecclesiastical and societal contexts, where men are privileged with authority and decision-making power, while women remain in subordinate roles. Sociologically, this dynamic illustrates the intersection of gender, power, and religion in shaping social norms and institutional practices. Gender inequality within the Church mirrors broader societal patterns that confine women to domestic or secondary roles, despite institutional claims of equality. The resistance to female ordination reflects theological conservatism and societal gender hierarchies. Moreover, the internalisation of patriarchal values by women perpetuates these norms, reinforcing barriers to gender equality. This reluctance to

challenge existing norms, even among women's Church wings, underscores the deep-rooted resistance to change within religious institutions.

Field research in the Khasi-Jaiñtia region highlights how traditional gender roles shape perceptions of women's leadership within the Church. Respondents, both male and female, contend that women's roles as mothers and caregivers conflict with the responsibilities of church ministers, reflecting the belief that women are inherently suited to domestic roles. Some women also maintain that administrative roles should remain male-dominated, viewing calls for gender equality as contrary to religious teachings and traditional family structures.

Religious texts further reinforce these gender roles. Lyngdoh (2016) argued that the Bible, central to Christian doctrine, has been interpreted through a patriarchal lens, as it was authored, edited, and interpreted by men. This male-centric interpretation shapes the normative understanding of scripture within the KJPSS, reinforcing male authority and perpetuating gendered power structures in religious institutions (p. 115).

Lyngdoh (2016) contends that the introduction of the Bible to the Khasi-Jaiñtia region brought Western patriarchal interpretations, which were absent from the traditional Khasi cultural framework. These interpretations have shaped the KJPSS's doctrine and practices, reinforcing male authority and restricting women to non-leadership roles, thereby influencing broader gender norms (p. 116). Additionally, the Khasi matrilineal system complicates this discourse. Some respondents argue that Khasi women already possess social empowerment within the family structure, asserting that leadership roles for women in the Church would disrupt male-dominated power dynamics and undermine the cultural order, despite matriliney's respect for women.

In both traditional and contemporary contexts, women's religious roles are closely linked to broader societal norms and gender ideologies. Rooted in patrilineal and patriarchal structures, these ideologies have gradually permeated the matrilineal Khasi society. Although the Khasi matrilineal system offers a degree of gender equality through inheritance and descent practices, patriarchal influences have subtly shaped certain socio-cultural spheres. The introduction of Christianity to the Khasi Hills exemplifies this cultural integration, where patriarchal interpretations of Christian scripture have significantly impacted women's roles within the Church. This has contributed to the marginalisation of women in ecclesiastical leadership, reinforcing gendered power dynamics within both religious and cultural contexts.

The patriarchal interpretation of religious texts emerged during early Christian missionary activities in the Khasi Hills, where Western interpretations of the Bible were introduced and influencing local religious practices. These interpretations, shaped by male-dominated theological traditions, reinforced gender hierarchies within Khasi religious and cultural life (Kharchandy et al., pp. 118-120). The intersection of matrilineal traditions and patriarchal religious ideologies has thus created a complex gendered religious landscape.

II. Conclusion

The exclusion of women from leadership positions within the Khasi Jaiñtia Presbyterian Synod Sepngi (KJPSS), including roles such as pastors and elders, can be examined sociologically as a reflection of deeply embedded patriarchal structures and gendered hierarchies. Although the Presbyterian Church of India (PCI) officially recognises the possibility of ordaining women, systemic and institutional obstacles hinder its actual implementation. The justification for excluding women, rooted in theological interpretations, operates as a mechanism of socialisation that reinforces prevailing gender norms. These interpretations, shaped by longstanding patriarchal traditions, position women in subordinate roles through interpellation, presenting their

exclusion as a divinely sanctioned order. Consequently, efforts to challenge these roles are often perceived as acts of defiance against both religious doctrine and established social norms. The structural dominance of the PCI in determining constitutional amendments reveals a disconnect between official policies and everyday realities. While women's ordination is theoretically permitted, power remains concentrated within a male leadership structure, thereby maintaining patriarchal authority. Additionally, the wider socio-cultural landscape of the Khasi-Jaintia region, which is shaped by traditional gender roles and patriarchal ideologies, plays a crucial role in influencing both religious and societal expectations. These cultural dynamics reinforce and legitimise the exclusion of women from religious leadership, demonstrating the interconnectedness of religious and social institutions in perpetuating systemic gender inequality. The opposition to women's ordination within the KJPSS represents a broader societal struggle between religious reforms and entrenched gender ideologies. In contrast, the Presbyterian Church of Wales has embraced women's ordination, illustrating how religious institutions differ in their interpretation and application of gender roles. Social pressures and informal power dynamics frequently override formal institutional policies, upholding male dominance despite doctrinal allowances. Addressing gender disparities in religious leadership, therefore, requires not only policy changes but also a fundamental shift in the socio-cultural structures that sustain patriarchal systems.

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