

Negotiating Tradition and Matriliney: A Feminist Analysis of Khasi Motherhood in Transition

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Abstract

The Khasi are one of the major tribes in the state of Meghalaya, India, comprising more than half of the total scheduled tribe population of the state. The Khasi follow a matrilineal kinship system in which the Khasi woman takes on multiple roles for the maintenance and sustenance of the clan through procreation, upholding the cultural beliefs and socialisation of the children. By situating the study within a social perspective focusing on the socio-cultural and political matrix of the Khasi society and through a feminist theoretical lens, the paper intends to examine certain aspects of motherhood as an institution and the practices involved in performing the role of mothering. The paper also intends to explore the importance of motherhood and the implications it has on the identity of a Khasi woman. Through in-depth interviews with fifty Khasi mothers within the area of Shillong urban agglomeration, the study found that kinship, religion, and culture play a crucial role in determining the perception of the maternal role in Khasi society. The study found that the 'mother role' was of primary importance for these women as a crucial source of identity within the family and society. It also found that the majority of the mothers practiced and conformed to intensive mothering ideology as a mothering practice.

Introduction

Throughout history and across the world, women's existence has always been justified only by the nurturing and mothering roles. The 18th and 19th centuries saw the legitimisation of women's role within the boundaries of the home in the work they carried out as mothers and nurturers. Her inferior position vis-à-vis a man and the gendered division of labour were justified through biological and deterministic theories that justified the intensive demands of motherhood while maintaining her position within the household. Evolutionary theories appropriated accounts of women lived experiences limited only to the domestic sphere and celebrated it in the ideology of the 'good mother'. The 20th century saw a proliferation of such ideas through the work of Sigmund Freud's

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emphasis on natural maternal instinct (Kadoglou and Sarri, 2014; Lillian, 2017). Thus, contextualisation of the concept of motherhood and mothering can be done through the proposition of biological and deterministic theories on what motherhood and mothering consist of and the contestation by feminist theories to such propositions. Feminist theories emerged to deconstruct such ideas that relegated the identity of a woman to that of a wife and a mother. They questioned the idea of a hallowed motherhood and the existence of a natural maternal instinct and campaigned for the liberation of the woman through her participation in the public sphere. Although women's contributions have expanded beyond motherhood to include other roles, parenting and care work continue to be crucial to women's standing both culturally and as the focus of policy (Stabelle, 2016). This primacy can be attributed to the institutionalisation of the female position in motherhood, which is justified by social, political, and cultural systems to produce an ideology of motherhood that confines women to the domestic sphere. Challenges to the mainstream ideology of motherhood involved questioning previous theories on it and revealing how women practiced agency by altering such norms in their everyday lives. This paper holds that motherhood is an institution that has been socially constructed, whereas mothering practices grant agency to the woman in constructing her self - reality. Motherhood constructs a woman's sense of identity and normative status in society as that of a 'good' or 'bad' mother and the meanings attached to the idea of motherhood. The experience of motherhood itself is constructed through socially mediated systems of culture, kinship, and religion, which shape how women perceive their roles and responsibilities as mothers within their communities. Thus, motherhood seeks to construct a reality for the woman that maintains the status quo in continuing the biological and social reproduction of society.

Concept of Motherhood and Mothering

Anthropologists have long recognised mothering as crucial to the transmission of culture, the development of enculturated individuals, the constitution of kinship, family, and household, and the reproduction of society. In these socialisation processes, the key socialisers of young children are typically their mothers. The transition to motherhood is a dynamic, diverse, and intricate process rather than a fixed process, and each experience of motherhood must be interpreted within the historical, cultural, social, economic, and political settings in which it is found. While motherhood as an institution encompasses the biological processes of pregnancy, childbirth, and the social expectations tied to these life events, mothering refers to the daily nurturing and caregiving practices. The transition to motherhood is also a period of redefining one's self-identity and status while also undergoing biological changes in one's body. The perceived naturalness of maternal love and the mother-child relationship has been widely debated, often being regarded as natural because of the division of roles and attributes into masculine and feminine categories.

The preoccupation of women with maternal roles was delved into by Wollstonecraft (1792), who talked of how dedicated involvement of women as wives and mothers would help raise their status in the society. By the 1900s, the role of the woman in her status of

mother was celebrated and glorified. In the 1970s and 1980s, the concept of motherhood and mothering was explored by Adrienne Rich in 'Of Woman Born', 'Motherhood as Experience and Institution' (1976), Nancy Chodorow in 'The Reproduction of Mothering: The Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender' (1978), and Carol Gilligan in her book titled 'In a Different Voice' (1982). The present study adopts a feminist's theoretical lens and draws from Adrienne Rich's (1998) terminology of the division of the concepts of motherhood and mothering, where Rich classifies motherhood as an institution and mothering as a set of practices that includes actual lived experiences of women all around the world. Rich's concept also describes that although motherhood is the construction of a woman's identity in her role as a mother, mothering gives her active agency in making choices for her life and parenthood. However, one has to take into account the limitations of her concepts because motherhood and mothering practices are interconnected and influence each other. Mothering is a culturally informed activity shaped by and also shaping the power structures within which women live (Barlow & Chapin, 2010). According to Andrea O'Reilly, "motherhood refers to the patriarchal institution of motherhood that is male-defined and controlled and is deeply oppressive to women, while the word 'mothering' refers to women's experiences of mothering that are female-defined and centred and potentially empowering to women" (2008, p. 3 in Sarkar, 2020, p. 5).

The twenty-first-century idea of motherhood is what Douglas and Michels call "new momism," which involves a 'complete' woman who has children and is devoted to the care of her children while also being able to 'have it all' in terms of career and a successful family life. Such an ideology has been disseminated by popular and cultural media that portray the seamless ease with which a mother balances her productive and reproductive priorities. Such an ideology again negates the lived experiences and voices of resistance of mothers and oppresses them into silence about being 'a good mother,' which again intensifies maternal guilt if they fall short of such expectations. This construction of mothering as a biological and instinctual activity consequently defines a woman's self-identity, as the 'success or failure' of her maternal role defines her sense of self-worth. Thus, in order to understand women's actual lived experiences, Gilligan's (1982) work placed emphasis on the need to listen to the voices and knowledge of women that had been suppressed by mainstream ideology. Her focus on relational listening brought out the truth of how the story under the surface could be uncovered and give a voice to those historically marginalised and intersectional groups like young girls and women. This would be a platform for mapping resistance against the systemic oppression that such groups faced (Josselson, 2023).

Situating Motherhood and Mothering within the Context of the Khasi Society

The Khasi social system is built on the foundation of the matrilineal principle, which shapes kinship, religion, and the social, economic, and political structure of the society. In the matrilineal system of the Khasi, descent is traced through one's *Kur*/clan, which unites all who claim descent from the same *Iawbei* (*First Ancestress*). Membership in one's clan confers social identity and status and serves as the connecting link of

an individual to the society. This fact is encapsulated in the principle of “*ka khein kur; khein kha, tip kur tip kha*” (to “know” the difference between one’s paternal and maternal clan). The primary unit of the system is the *iing* (household). The *iing* has two connotations in the Khasi society. It is a unit of social identification of consanguineal kin who trace descent from *Ka Īawbei* (great grandmother), and it is also a unit of co-residence of kin/household. Thus, it consists of the mother and her consanguineal relatives, which may or may not include the spouses. Even though the descent is traced from the mother, the children belong to the mother’s clan, and she is expected to adhere to Khasi social customs and norms in the upbringing of her children. The father/ *U Kpa* is also considered important. He is the bridge connecting the relationship between two *kur*—his mother’s clan and his wife’s clan. It is within the *iing* that the everyday domestic practice of mothering for the Khasi woman unfolds, whereby the individual maternal role links to the social structure.

The complex relationship between matriliney and motherhood in the Khasi society has been illuminated by some academics from the Khasi society itself. Kharkrang (2011) describes the cultural definitions of the motherhood role through the concept of the ‘process of appropriation.’ He talks of the traditional concept of motherhood, including the elements of impregnation, gestation, birth, lactation, and weaning. He describes birth as a natural life process but kinship systems as cultural patterns. Kharkrang (2011) describes the ‘process of appropriation’ as a way in which there is a distinction brought about through the working of the kinship system where the one who gives birth (and is important for clan survival) is separated from the power to make decisions (p. 15). In relegating the role of a custodian of the lineage, clan, and family religion, the Khasi woman is overwhelmed with responsibilities, but the management of the same falls on either her brother or her maternal uncle (Nakane, 1967; Chacko, 1991; Nongbri, 1988; Kharkrang, 2011). Thus, the maternal role of the Khasi mother consists of the transmission of descent, inheritance, and succession through her children; fulfilling the role of the custodian of her family house; undertaking the family religion and the family identity; and also, being entrusted with the socialisation of the children into the norms and values of the society. The role of the mother is fulfilled in the elementary family (consisting of the father, mother, and their offspring), known as *iing tnat* (War, 1998, p. 29). The familial roles within the household of the *iing tnat* are defined clearly. The father plays the role of provider while the mother is the housekeeper. If it is the youngest daughter’s household, it often includes unmarried brothers and sisters. Sometimes, the household also includes nephews and nieces who have been orphaned or abandoned (Mawrie, 1981, p. 55). A Khasi woman is the guardian and preserver of the family property. Although her role in family matters is essential for daily household affairs, she cannot claim headship in the family (Kyndiah, 1990). It is the *Kñi* who manages the property on her behalf and carries out financial tasks (Chacko, 1998, p. 3). The society attaches special importance to women because perpetuation of the clan depends on them. As a consequence, marriage, procreation, and incorporation of children into the clan become imperative, with failure to procreate being a serious matter for both the woman and the family, and in many cases, it is a valid ground for divorce.

The Khasi society makes a sharp distinction between domestic and politico-jural domains so that while the men wield power in both domains, women are confined to the domestic sphere and looked at primarily as reproducers and mothers. In the family, too, men exercise control over important matters. Among the Khasi, the clan is always headed by a male (*u rangbah kur*). This is also reflected in the management of property, whereby it is the men who have traditionally exercised control, as the *khadduh* is considered lacking in experience to be entrusted with management. This produces a pattern that constructs women as inferior to men, with men accorded the status of protector (*u nong bsa u nong bthiah*). A man's physiological strength (*u rangbah khaddar bor*) gives him authority over a woman (*ka nong bat ka nong lum*). In her article, Nongbri (1988) states that Khasi women have been systematically excluded from politics and other key areas of decision-making. The gendered division of roles within the household constructs a woman as a mother whose most important role is the perpetuation of her clan. The woman's priority is to her children and the reproduction of her clan and her *iing*. Thus, her identity as a mother is affected by the kinship role she plays, and the cultural construct of motherhood is defined by the clan to which she belongs.

The study of motherhood within the Khasi matrilineal context will allow us to examine how a system that ostensibly centers women through descent simultaneously also constrains them through gendered power structures. A Khasi woman's identity as a mother is profoundly shaped by her kinship role, and the cultural construct of motherhood is defined by the clan she belongs to. Drawing from the above analysis of motherhood in the Khasi society, the paper intends to highlight, through empirical findings, how the institution of motherhood within the Khasi social matrix has defined the self-identity of the Khasi woman through her maternal role

Aims and Methodology

The objective of the paper is to look at the how motherhood is practiced in Khasi society and investigate the essential elements of Khasi women's mothering practices. Based on the research problem and objectives of the study, the definition of motherhood and mothering practices has been linked within the context of the Khasi society by drawing inferences from literary writings on the aforementioned themes. The study identifies a research gap in previous writings on kinship, lineage and Khasi matriliney, which has not focussed on motherhood and its effects in Khasi society, even though motherhood plays a central role in perpetuation of the kinship system, lineage and inheritance patterns. Motherhood within the study is defined as both a lived experience of conception, gestation, and birthing and, by extensionsocial reproduction of offspring and as an institution that both determines and is determined by the practices of performing these tasks. Mothering is defined as the practices and behaviours associated with parenting in terms of the care and sustenance of children.

The study consisted of two phases. The first phase involved collecting secondary data from journals, books and online newspapers. The second phase consisted of gathering primary data through non-probability, purposive sampling method, targeting

respondents who had at least one child and belonged to Khasi society living in the Shillong agglomeration. The sampling was limited to 50 respondents as data saturation was achieved (no new themes were emerging) (see Francis et al. 2010). Participants were recruited through a combination of personal networks and snowball sampling. Initial contacts were made via community volunteers and local women's groups; these individuals then referred other mothers who met the inclusion criteria. Prospective participants were approached in person or by phone, and were given an explanation of the purpose and objective of the study and invited to take part voluntarily and only those who consented were included. Data was collected using a semi structured interview schedule that combined close-ended questions (quantitative) and open-ended questions (qualitative), with greater emphasis on the latter. The schedule covered factors influencing women to become a mother and the lived experience of mothering practice. The study is exploratory because there is hardly any literature that focuses specifically on motherhood in Khasi society; it therefore seeks to map the characteristics of motherhood as experienced by Khasi mothers within their social system. The qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Quantitative data from the closed-ended questions were tabulated to provide descriptive context (categorical data) and integrated with qualitative themes where relevant. Data collection and analysis proceeded concurrently, and recruitment stopped when no new themes emerged, confirming data saturation.

Socio-economic Background

The study discovered several characteristics of mothering among Khasi mothers, all of which have been categorised under corresponding themes identified by the researchers. Out of the total respondents, 72 percent resided in urban areas, and 28 percent lived in rural areas. In terms of age group, the 35–44 age group had the greatest percentage (32 percent), followed by the 45–54 age group (30 percent), the 25–34 age group (28 percent), the 55–64 age group (8 percent), and the 65–74 age group (2 percent). Out of the fifty respondents, twenty-six respondents had postgraduate degrees, twenty respondents had graduate or equivalent degrees, three respondents had pre-university education, and one respondent had no formal education. Forty-Four respondents (80 percent) were employed, out of which three were self-employed, twelve had private jobs, twenty-six had government jobs, and three were working as manual laborers. Out of the fifty respondents, forty-three respondents resided in a dual-income family, whereas seven respondents were the sole income earners in their family.

The following table depicts the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents according to the age variable. Age was taken as the independent variable since the age of the respondent corresponds to the life cycle where she is positioned. To capture differences in decision-making maturity, career stability, and the role of education and dependents across the family life cycle, respondents' ages were grouped into five stages: 25–34 (early adulthood), 35–44 (early middle adulthood), 45–54 (late middle

adulthood), 55–64 (late adulthood), and 65–74 (old age). The highest percentage of the age group (64 percent) participating in the study came from the age group (35–55 years old), thus implying the majority of respondents were in the middle-aged category. This age group also had the highest number of respondents (thirty-one respondents) who had completed formal education, were employed (thirty-one respondents), were married (twenty-eight respondents), and were in a dual-income family (twenty-eight). Thirteen out of fourteen respondents who belonged to the early adulthood category (25-34 years) had completed formal education, and eleven were employed and married. Those in the late adulthood and old age groups (four respondents) had completed formal education and were highly educated. Out of the four respondents in these categories, only two were still employed; one was not employed, and another had retired from the formal sector. Three out of four of these respondents were married, and one respondent had separated from their spouse.

Table 1: Socio- Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Sl. No.	Age Group	Respondents	Residence		Educational Qualification				Employed			Sole Income Earner		Marital Status			
			Rural	Urban	Higher Secondary	Graduate	Postgraduate	NFE	Yes	No	Retired	Yes	No	Never Married	Married	Divorced Separated	Widowed
1	25-34	14	5	9	1	6	6	1	11	3	0	1	13	1	11	1	1
2	35-44	15	3	12	1	4	10	0	14	1	0	1	14	0	14	0	1
3	45-54	17	5	12	0	8	9	0	17	0	0	3	14	0	14	0	3
4	55-64	3	1	2	0	2	1	0	2	1	0	1	2	0	3	0	0
5	65-74	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	0
Total		50	14	36	2	21	26	1	44	5	1	6	44	1	42	2	5

Out of the 50 respondents, twenty-six had postgraduate degrees, twenty had graduate or equivalent degrees, three had pre-university education, and one did not receive formal education. The table shows that one graduate was retired, two postgraduates were unemployed, one graduate was unemployed, two pre-university graduates were unemployed, and one with no education was also unemployed. Further, forty-nine of the total respondents were married, while one respondent was in a cohabiting union. Additionally, two out of the forty-nine respondents were divorced, and five were widowed. The majority (56 percent) of respondents had completed post-graduation, were employed and married, and had one to two children. Out of those employed, nineteen worked in formal sector jobs, three owned their own business, six were college teachers, and one was working in the unorganised sector. Thus, the majority of the respondents were located in a middle-income group. Therefore, the results of the study portray the experiences of motherhood from the educated, middle-income group

of the respondents. The researchers wanted to verify whether access to education and economic resources would have a differential impact on their beliefs about motherhood, and thus the sample consists of mothers who were highly educated and economically well-to-do. This is important since women across different contexts and locations experience motherhood differently, and this also shapes how they reframe their own practices of mothering.

Findings

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the experiences and variables of motherhood and practices of mothering among mothers in the Khasi Society. The study consisted of analysing data on the factors for considering motherhood, the experience of motherhood, and whether the role of motherhood was perceived by the mother as valuable. It also collected data on reasons for family planning, the areas in which the mother had to compromise due to extensive mothering, and whether this impacted other roles and the identity of the mother. Using the thematic analysis, the study came up with five characteristics of motherhood among the Khasi.

1. Importance of Motherhood as a life event.
2. Surrendering the choice of planning motherhood to external factors.
3. Effects of motherhood on the women
4. Coexistence of Intensive and Extensive Mothering
5. Motherwork

Importance of Motherhood as a Life Event

Undergoing motherhood, as per the study, occupied a crucial aspect in the lives of the Khasi Women as it functioned not merely as a personal milestone but also as a structural imperative with the matrilineal system. Multifaceted significance of maternal identity could be delineated from the responses. Respondents perceived and framed motherhood not merely as individual preferences but as essential for the continuation of the lineage itself. Thus, she is expected to bear children in order to perpetuate the clan lineage. A substantial portion of the respondents viewed motherhood as essential for living a fulfilled life (44 percent), with consistent articulating sentiments such as *having children is important to me for feeling complete as a woman* and *I think life is fulfilled by having children*. Further, motherhood was marked as important to undergo the process of womanhood (40 percent of the respondents), which suggests that for Khasi women, maternity was essential to achieve feminine identity. As one respondent stated, motherhood provided *an identity in the society*, while another described it as *a blessing and a gift from God*. Beyond the continuation of lineage and feminine identity, the pragmatic dimension of valuing motherhood also emerged from the data. For some, motherhood was important as it would provide future social and potential security, such as support in old age, affection, and marital stability (30 percent), among others. Aside from the pragmatic and instrumental valuation, deep internalisation of maternal destiny as a neutralised aspect of feminine identity was also observed in the form of intrinsic

motivation, as some of the respondents (24 percent) believed motherhood was *what they were meant to do*.

Respondents attaching importance to motherhood was found to be intimately linked to women's actual experiences of mothering, as the majority of the respondents (60 percent) stated that their experiences of mothering were fulfilling and enriching, and enabled them to maintain the status of parent in society. This correlates in a positive manner with the cultural expectation to complete the family through reproduction and also ensure the survival of the clan. However, variation in the experience of motherhood was observed, as 26 percent stated that they had to undergo social adjustment to 'fit into' the role of mother. As one respondent noted, *I was told to bring up my children in a strict manner. There should be no room for idleness, irresponsibility, etc. Right now, as my baby is just 2 months, my mother-in-law advised me since she said it is my first time experience being a mother.* They also added that they had to face unwanted comments on their food habits, behaviour of the children, and the dressing of the children. 5 respondents stated their perspective on life and family changed through the experience of motherhood. Of these, twenty-one respondents had harboured aspirations for establishing a career and excelling in their fields before having children, and their plans had to be adjusted to accommodate the demands of mothering while still providing for their children. The statement of one respondent echoes the same statements made by the twenty-one others when she stated, *I plan to be able to work and raise my children at the same time. To be a good and responsible mother. Now I am still learning every day to manage both.* One respondent stated that motherhood became important for their identity and status, and one stated that it was challenging and frustrating.

Table 2: Experience of Motherhood on Khasi Women

Experience of Motherhood	Respondents	Percentage
1. Fulfilling and Enriching	30	60%
2. Social adjustment to fit into the new role	13	26%
3. Changed perspective on life	5	10%
4. Important for Identity and status	1	2%
5. Challenging and Frustrating	1	2%
Total	50	100%

Surrendering Choice of Planning Motherhood to External Factors

The decision and the choice of becoming a mother undergo a complex process that is hardly completely rational or conscious. It is dependent on multiple factors such as the timing of choosing to be a mother (which again is associated with cultural expectations of who can be a 'good mother'), the resources available to one, one's relationship with the partner, etc. In the sample, we also observe that the choices and reasons for valuing motherhood are both personal and social. This section examines how various social and structural factors influence and frequently determine reproductive decision-making among Khasi women, even as some exercise varying degrees of agency within these constraints.

For a Khasi woman, the purpose of marriage as a social institution is only realised when she can produce an offspring. Often this cultural expectation (along with her other roles) of motherhood provides her with a distinct social status in society. The birth of children as a normative process of the life cycle of a Khasi woman is evident through the choices made for the reproductive cycle of the respondents in the study. The findings reveal a significant pattern in regard to decisions about motherhood, in particular the timing and the number of children, which were substantially influenced and determined by factors beyond the individual's control. While some respondents took up family planning, with numerous of the respondents stating, *I planned together with my husband*, a considerable number (42 percent) described their productive paths as being a natural life process or a gift from God. McQuillan et al.'s (2008) observation can be highlighted whereby the author states that parenthood appears to be a normative cultural expectation to bear and rear children are internalised. Further in the Khasi context, reproduction carries religious connotations and is considered exigent for clan survival. Respondents additionally framed childbirth as strengthening the marital bond and fulfilling one's purpose in life. Out of the twenty-two respondents (44 percent) of women who did not adopt family planning, over one-third considered it unnecessary, believing in allowing nature to take its own course. Five women attributed not taking up family planning to being too young to make informed reproductive choices, while others framed children as divine blessings or cited conscience, advanced maternal age, or desire for large families as determining factors.

Religious and gender ideologies are both vital cultural factors that are likely to influence the importance of motherhood (Mcquillan et al., 2008). Religion emerged as particularly significant in shaping reproductive choices and maternal practices. All the respondents belonged to Christianity and believed that religion provided guidance on inculcating norms of exemplary parenting. Thirty-six women (72 percent) stated religion provided them with guidelines on how to model for their children and transmit necessary societal values, thereby giving them a profound sense of purpose. This finding may be situated within a deeply religious society where conduct is substantially determined by adherence to behavioural norms set by religion—initially the Khasi indigenous religion and now predominantly Christianity. Respondents use religion as a coping mechanism to provide meaning to their experience of motherhood and use it as a positive reinforcement of conduct for their children set by society. Christianity has played its part in subsuming the mother/woman within the home, but women are using this as a tool for their mothering practices. The cultural expectation to bear children is further reinforced by beliefs about marriage and family completeness. Nine women also believed that having children was the way they could have a *complete family*. As one respondent articulated, *we got married to have children to form a complete family. Having my own children is the main reason for my marriage. God really blessed me unexpectedly*. This belief has its roots in the institution of marriage among the Khasi (both within Christianity and also the indigenous religion of *Niam Khasi*), who believe that the foundation of the family starts with the children. If the couple is without issue, they cannot assume the roles of mother and father, and thus the objective of the marriage remains unfulfilled. As Giri (1985) notes, this can later become a source of marital dissolution, as there is a belief that such a marriage is not ordained by God (p. 166).

Table 3: Reasons for Not Adopting Family Planning

Reasons for not Adopting Family Planning	Respondents	Percentage
1. Family Planning is unnecessary	8	36.36%
2. Too young to make a decision	5	22.72%
3. Children as God's Blessing/against Conscience	4	18.18%
4. Higher age of the mother	3	13.63%
5. Desire for big family	2	9.09%
Total	22	100%

However, the process is more complex when we take into account those respondents who did opt for family planning. The rationale for adopting planning was influenced by factors and conditions such as women's age, income, marital status, religion, educational background, workplace flexibility, and career opportunities. Respondents from comparatively better economic backgrounds with education could exercise choice in planning their families. The data indicated that eighteen respondents (36 percent) married at a later age and wanted to have children before they could no longer bear children. In the case of women planning pregnancies, external factors such as age and marriage timing significantly shaped their reproductive decisions. This suggests that while socio-economic resources expand the reproductive choice, they do not eliminate the structural parameters within which such choices are made. Making choices regarding one's reproductive capacity is fundamental to widely accepted definitions of human dignity and has implications for women's ability to exert influence in the public sphere, where they are still underrepresented at the highest levels of power (Stabille, 2016). This applies in the case of the Khasi society too, where women have been traditionally discouraged from taking part as active leaders in local villages. The saying "*Wow la kynih ka 'iar kynthei, ka pyrthei ka la wai*". (When the hen crows, the world will end) reflects this situation. The saying describes the absurdity of women taking political leadership in councils or *durbar shnong* (a hen crowing instead of a cock) and when such gender roles are reversed, disorder or social breakdown will ensue (Nongbri, 1988; Mawrie, 1981; Chacko, 1991; Nakane, 1967). Thus, even among highly educated respondents, social and cultural conditioning strongly shapes life choices, particularly in regard to motherhood as integral to their identity. The imperative to reproduce functions through several reinforcing mechanisms such as the structural requirement of clan continuity, religious frameworks sanctifying childbearing, social expectations defining completed womanhood through maternity, and marital ideologies positioning children as the purpose of a union or marriage. These factors intersect and converge to make reproduction or childbearing seem to appear less as a conscious choice and more as an unavoidable life passage, reflecting the embeddedness of women's reproductive decisions within the cultural, social, and structural expectations that constitute the distinctive character of Khasi motherhood.

Effects of Motherhood on the Woman

The paper also takes into account the effects of motherhood on respondents’ lives by focusing on three interrelated dimensions namely, the primacy of maternal identity relative to other social roles, the areas of life where compromise has to be made, and the connection between mothering and economic work. Respondents were asked whether the identity as a mother takes priority over their other roles, such as the role of a wife, daughter, worker, and clan member. Out of the n=50 respondents, twenty-nine respondents (58 percent) stated that maternal identity held primary importance, while twelve (24 percent) disagreed, and eight respondents (16 percent) provided a neutral response. The response pattern suggests that for the majority of the Khasi women, motherhood functions as a ‘master status’ (Hughes, 1945), which organises and subordinates all other statuses within an individual’s self-conceptual framework. As noted previously, the Khasi matrilineal context instils motherhood with the dual significance of fulfilling personal identity and ensuring lineage continuity, consequently intensifying identification with the maternal role.

The prioritisation of maternal identity requires compromising over several areas of the women’s lives. Twenty-five respondents (50 percent) stated that they compromised in self-care activities (such as inadequate sleep, nutrition, personal hobbies, and wellness practices) , reducing time and energy for maintaining their own physical and mental well-being; 36 percent had limited freedom of mobility (inability to move freely outside the home without coordinating child care arrangements); and 26 percent described compromise in participation in community activities (such as reduced participation in religious gatherings and kin meeting and community programs). Such compromises reflect and align with Mcquillan, Greil, Shreffler, & Tichenor’s (2008) conceptualisation of ‘the cost of motherhood’ (material, temporal, and emotional resources) that women must divert from other pursuits and devote themselves to fulfilling maternal responsibilities.

Table 4: Effects of Motherhood on the Identity of the Respondents

Effects	Respondent	Percentage
1. Affected career opportunities/job prospects	17	44%
2. Fundamentally changed life goals	14	36%
3. Effected status within family	11	28%
4. Effected status in broader society	8	21%
Total	50	100%

The data above highlights the effects of motherhood on women’s life goals and career prospects. As per table 4, a considerable portion (44 percent) of respondents stated that motherhood has affected their career opportunities and job prospects, while 36 percent of the respondents described how fundamental changes occurred in their life goals. Additionally, 28 respondents stated that motherhood affected their statuses within their families, and 21 respondents stated that they experienced changes in their societal status. An intriguing finding is in regard to the relationship between mothering and

economic work, as all the respondents stated that their work adds value and support to their maternal role. As one respondent stated, *the income I make determines the kind of lifestyle I can provide for my daughter. All important aspects of a child's life, like health, education, and financial security, depend on the stable income of the parents.* The above statements and their implication align with Petts's (2012) observation on childbearing. As per the author's perception, childbearing prompts parents to reevaluate priorities and orient their lives around meeting children's needs. As such, 21 percent explicitly stated that their life goals transformed completely as they revolved around organising and fulfilling parenting responsibilities. This finding must be situated within the material realities of Khasi households and the specific demands of matrilineal kinship. As pointed out by Nongbri (1988), Mawrie (1981), Chacko (1991), and Nakane (1967), Khasi women bear dual responsibility, that is, for their children and also for the maintenance of the *iingand*, in many case for upholding family religious practices as *Nong Bat Niam* (keeper of family religion). These multiple responsibilities generate material needs, which the women's economic work helps to meet, and hence, rather than viewing work as detracting from mothering, respondents take it as essential to fulfil their material and kinship obligations.

Coexistence of Intensive Mothering with Extensive Mothering

Christopher (2008), in discussing intensive mothering, cites Hays's (1996) introduction of the term 'intensive mothering,' which is an ideology that positions the mothers as the central caregivers of children, with ideal child rearing construed as time-intensive, guided by experts, and emotionally engrossing, and requiring mothers to devote all their time and love to their children. This ideology was clearly manifested in the present study, as forty-one mothers (82 percent) justified earning income to maintain and meet the demands of child care, particularly education. This pattern of intensive mothering entails children becoming the legitimising framework for women's economic activity. Transition of motherhood that begins from childbirth transforms the women to imbibe the role of a mother, which entails becoming the primary caregiver in the child's life. Taking up the maternal role involves developing a social self that provides for the child's biological needs while simultaneously adhering to the cultural constructions of the 'good mother.' This process generates considerable mental pressure and stress, particularly as women navigate the gap between idealised motherhood and actual lived experiences. Mothers who fail to embody feminine ideals of patience, selflessness, and enduring love encounter specific forms of discrimination. As Seelhoff (2006) and Lillian (2017) observe, mothers experience distinctive forms of discrimination that manifest in enforced silence whereby they are unable to voice the difficulties, uncertainties, and emotional complexities of mothering.

Further, the perceived notion of naturalisation of maternal love, which is part of the intensive mothering ideology, was affirmed as forty-six respondents (92 percent) stated that maternal love is natural to the mother after childbirth. This complete endorsement of natural maternal love entrenched in the mindset of our respondents suggests a deep socialisation process where maternal love is deemed normative and

biological. However, along with intensive mothering, the data also revealed patterns of what Christopher (2012) terms 'extensive mothering,' which is the practice where mothers, particularly employed mothers, delegate substantial day-to-day childcare to others and reframe good mothering as being in charge of and ultimately responsible for their children's well-being. Even though 100 percent of women affirmed that mothers and fathers should both be involved in childcare, twenty-nine mothers (58 percent) continued to spend considerable amounts of time (4-6 hours in a day) in care work. This contradiction suggests that even if ideas of equal parenting are influencing couples today, the cultural ideologies of motherhood and gendered division of labour persist in positioning women as the primary caregivers. As such, thirty-nine women (78 percent) agreed that as primary caregivers, they had the ultimate responsibility for the daily upbringing of the children. However, forty-seven mothers (94 percent) clarified that they receive support through delegation of childcare to immediate family members, maids, and even neighbours. This widespread dependence on supportive social networks reveals the practice of extensive mothering among these Khasi mothers, most of whom are employed workers. However, the set of support networks that a mother has access to, is contingent on her socio-economic position; either she might have the resources to hire a maid, or she may use kin networks if she does not have the economic resources. This class dimension of extensive mothering underlines that the intensive/extensive dichotomy is not merely ideological but materially structured by women's access to resources.

Motherwork

Motherwork encompasses the domains of responsibilities that constitute motherhood, which is not merely subjectively perceived but socially assigned and culturally prescribed. These behavioural expectations of motherhood expand to include not only the care of children but also women's identities (Nichols, Gringle & Pulliam, 2015). In the Khasi context, being a woman included the 'natural' qualities of a mother, such as sacrificing for her children; being patient; teaching, and influencing her children, as major responsibilities in motherwork. While maintaining a loving and caring relationship with their children was paramount to the respondents, they also wanted to be responsible and religiously oriented role models for their children. Daily responsibilities of mothering included making sure their children were well fed, clothed, and sent to good educational institutes. However, mother work exacts a significant cost due to the high demands and expectations attached to motherhood in Khasi society. Twenty-five mothers (50 percent) reported that mothering negatively affected self-care practices such as self-care activities (including sleep, adequate food, hobbies, wellness activities, etc.).

Discussion and Conclusion

The study set out to examine how mothering and motherhood are experienced by Khasi women within the matrilineal kinship system of the Khasi society and how these experiences are culturally and socially patterned. The findings of the paper reveal a complex phenomenon of intersecting and converging meanings, practices, and constraints aligning with universal patterns of motherhood and manifesting of

distinctive features arising from specific matrilineal contexts. An important finding was the 'matrilineal paradox,' construction wherein Khasi women occupy a position of structural importance as the perpetrators of the clan (*kur*), custodians of the ancestral home (*iing*), and transmitters of lineage, inheritance, and cultural identity, but at the same time the symbolic elevation coexists with systematic exclusion from decision-making authority in the Khasi Society. The "process of appropriation" identified by Kharkrang (2011) finds empirical validation as specific arrangement of gendered inequality is manifested whereby women's structural indispensability becomes the very grounds for their containment within the domestic sphere.

Further widespread conformity to intensive mothering ideologies among the respondents was observed however, the conformity functions within a distinctively Khasi cultural logic that goes beyond the Western framework as Khasi woman links the mother-child dyad to the entire matrilineal structure when she ascribes to the roles that the specific kinship system demands of her, the role of the reproducer and custodian of the clan. The mother's role in the *iing* is not merely nurturing; she is also entrusted with duties involving religion, clan identity, and the socialisation of children into Khasi norms and values.

Another main finding was that Khasi women undertook extensive along with intensive mothering. Although mothers rely on support networks, the cultural ideology of maternal responsibility persists. Khasi women's maternal responsibilities extend beyond childcare to encompass identity formation and cultural transmission, resulting in expansive mother work, which in turn exacts a significant cost in terms of negative effects on self-care. The finding related with factors influencing reproductive decisions suggests collective circumscription of women's reproductive agency due to cultural expectation of bearing children for clan perpetuation, religious frameworks sanctification of childbearing and marital ideologies positioning children as purpose of marriage union. Further while socio-economic resources (as in the case of some respondents) may expand the choice they do not eliminate the structural boundaries within which choices are made. In the study, religion also emerged as a significant factor in shaping both reproductive choices and maternal practices. Respondents' statement on religion providing a framework for inculcating values to children highlights that the respondents invoked religion as a meaning-making resource for maternal experience and also served as positive reinforcement for socially sanctioned behaviour.

The study examined motherhood as an institution and an experience among Khasi women within the matrilineal Kinship system. The findings suggest that matrilineal societies generate specific arrangement of power, meaning, and constraints whereby the Khasi women occupy a symbolic position of structural importance as perpetrators of the clan and custodians of ancestral continuity, while at the same time the position is a symbolic centrality that coexists with systematic exclusion from decision-making authority. The data underlines the importance of examining how intensive mothering ideologies operate within non-western kinship contexts wherein the maternal labour reproduces not only individual children but an entire social order, yet her identity

remains intimately linked to reproductive capacity in such a way that it limit possibilities for selfhood beyond motherhood. In this sense, the Khasi mother is neither a feminist success story nor a simple victim of patriarchy. She is, rather, a site where the contradictions of matriliney are lived out daily in the practices of mothering, the routines of the *iing*, and the perpetuation of the *kur*. Her experiences have to be taken into context as they illuminate the particular ways in which kinship, gender, and power intersect in one of the world's few remaining matrilineal societies.

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