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Research Article

A Study of Informal Women Workers in Imphal City: Navigating Social and Cultural Experiences in Relation to Marriage Expenditures

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Abstract

This study explores the relationship between marriage expenditures and the socio-cultural and economic realities of informal women workers in Imphal City, Manipur. Through qualitative interviews and surveys with 50 respondents from daycare centres and a market, the research examines how financial constraints and cultural values shape women's decisions regarding wedding costs. The findings highlight a significant increase in wedding expenses, driven by societal expectations, but also reveal a preference for modest, budget-conscious weddings that prioritise tradition over luxury. This aligns with socio-cultural norms and gender roles, where simplicity in wedding practices becomes a symbol of resilience and cultural adherence. The study underscores the importance of addressing the financial challenges faced by women in the informal sector and advocates for greater awareness and support to ensure that meaningful celebrations remain accessible despite rising costs.

Keywords: Informal women workers, marriage expenditures, socio-cultural values, financial constraints, wedding practices, Manipur, economic vulnerability, cultural identity.

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Introduction

Women in Manipur play a pivotal role in the socio-economic fabric of their society, much like in other parts of history, where women have been integral to societal progress. Almost every woman in Manipur is involved in some form of work, whether in the formal or informal sectors, contributing to both small and large-scale activities. Manipuri women are visibly active in the workforce, engaging in a wide range of occupations, from running market stalls to working in professional environments. Their economic involvement is not only a norm but also a societal expectation, where contributing financially is seen as part of their role.

Various studies have noted that Manipuri women enjoy a high degree of freedom, mobility, and visibility within the community (Tineshowri, 2013; Chingtham, 2014), alongside strong participation in the workforce with

regular incomes (Dhaneshwari, 2016). In the cultural context of Manipur, as noted by Vijaylakshmi Brara (2017), women who do not contribute economically are often viewed as lazy. This societal view underscores the importance placed on economic productivity for women, reinforcing their central role in sustaining families and communities in Manipur. Their ability to navigate both traditional responsibilities and modern economic demands exemplifies the strength and resilience of Manipuri women in today's society.

This paper underscores the active participation of Manipuri women in the labor force, with nearly every woman engaged in some form of work. Their involvement in economic activities provides them with greater economic independence and visibility in the public sphere. Their widespread workforce participation is evident throughout the region. This paper examines

market women and daycare workers, both from the informal sector, who earn modest incomes. It highlights the complex relationship between their financial conditions and socio-cultural factors influencing marriage expenditures. Despite their limited earnings, they are acutely aware of the growing trend of extravagant wedding expenses driven by social and cultural expectations. The study explores how these women, despite precarious and unstable working conditions, feel pressured to prioritise wedding expenses. However, many respondents strongly believe that they should adhere to their financial limitations, regardless of societal norms.

Using qualitative interviews and a survey of 50 respondents from Imphal City, the paper highlights how marriage expenditures are shaped by cultural values, family expectations, and community pressures, reflecting both economic and social dimensions.

Historical Background of Manipuri Women

Manipuri women have historically held critical roles in managing family affairs, agriculture, trade, and markets, while also being active participants in public protests and movements. Their involvement is deeply rooted in Manipuri society, where they not only excel in economic activities but also lead social and political causes. As Arambam (2007) highlights, Manipuri folk literature has long portrayed women as central figures of resistance, emphasising the enduring collective power of women in the region.

In addition to their roles in household and market activities, Manipuri women had the unique right to collectively present their grievances to the monarch. This level of access to power was exceptional, with kings sometimes granting clemency to those condemned to death at their request. Women consistently exercised their right to challenge state policies, demonstrating their authority and influence even within the framework of a patriarchal society.

The significance of Manipuri women's activism became particularly apparent during the British colonial period, when they led two historic uprisings known as the Nupi Lan (Women's Wars) in 1904 and 1939. These movements were sparked by oppressive policies, including the British attempt to reinstate forced labor, and showcased the women's capacity for collective action against exploitation. Their leadership in these revolts marked a powerful moment in the history of resistance to colonial and feudal systems. "Women played important roles not only in the economic activities but in the political reforms of Manipur also" (Longjam, 1998). This highlights their active participations in political events and issues.

In more recent times, between 1972 and 1980, Meitei women continued their activism through the *Nisabandh*, or prohibitionist movement, which evolved into the Meira Paibi movement—an enduring symbol of women's vigilance against social injustice and violence. The Nupi Keithel, or Women's Market, is another testament to the extraordinary role of Manipuri women. It stands as the only market in the world run entirely by women, embodying their economic independence and

societal influence. Established as a result of the Lallup system, which forced men into military service, women took over the economic management of their families, marking a profound departure from traditional gender norms. This market has since become an enduring symbol of the economic freedom enjoyed by Meitei women, demonstrating their continued visibility and mobility in public spaces.

The long-standing participation of Manipuri women in both economic and political spheres illustrates their integral role in shaping their society. From leading revolts against oppressive regimes to commanding economic affairs, Manipuri women defy the conventional gender norms seen in other parts of India, making them a powerful force for both social and economic change.

Objectives of Study

1. To analyse the attitudes of informal women workers towards marriage expenditures and how their financial conditions influence their spending decisions.
2. To examine the recent trends in marriage expenditures and their socio-cultural significance, particularly among women working in the informal sector.

Methodology

The study was conducted at three daycare centres and a market, with a total of 50 respondents. The selected Daycare Centres are Bubble Beats, Keishampat; Planet Kids, Khamnam Leirak; and Rainbow Kids Arcadia, Kongba Uchekon Khunou. The market chosen for the study is Kwakeithel Bazaar. Given the focus on examining recent trends in marriage expenditures, a survey method was employed. Surveys are particularly effective for capturing trends and understanding specific situations or settings, as they help answer questions related to 'what, where, when, and who.' The research relies on both primary and secondary data, with a stronger emphasis on primary sources. A structured questionnaire was administered to 30 respondents from Daycare Centres, while face-to-face interviews were conducted with 20 respondents from the market. The questions were designed to be clear and comprehensible to avoid any confusion. This method proved especially effective for gathering data from market women, ensuring a personal interaction between the researcher and the respondent. According to Kothari (2004), "Depth interviews are designed to discover underlying motives and desires and are often used in motivational research, exploring the needs, desires, and feelings of respondents." This approach was integral to the data collection process.

Data Analysis

Some of the important wedding practices have been considered in the process of investigation. These wedding practices have been analysed and interpreted in relation to the socio-cultural significance.

Result and Discussion

This paper examines selected wedding practices, exploring the connection between the expenses associated with these practices and their impact on the

socio-economic conditions of women. These wedding practices can be viewed as forms of consumption. These practices are not adopted or performed by everyone but are limited to a specific segment of society. Over time, they emerge as visible trends that can be regarded as performative displays.

According to Bourdieu, cultural capital is exhibited through consuming cultural activities such as visiting the museum, the theatre, the concert, the art cinema, etc. (Bourdieu, 1973, pp. 491-492). These activities are primarily consumed by a specific segment of society and tend to acquire the power of social distinction typically associated with traditionally esteemed forms of art. Similarly, the wedding practices under consideration are observed as forms of consumption that reflect the socio-economic conditions of the people who engage in them.

Attitudes Toward Luxurious Weddings

The majority of informal women workers in this study do not find it important to have a luxurious wedding. Out of 50 respondents, 39 (78%) stated that it was "Not important" to them. While 11 respondents (22%) found it "Somewhat important," none (0) considered it "Very important" or "Extremely important." 78% (39) of respondents considering a luxurious wedding unimportant suggests that it holds no significance for them. This implies that majority of the respondents considered a luxurious wedding as unimportant. This can be considered as a choice which they made in relation to their status, which often leads to the formation of status groups. As Weber articulates,

Above all, the status order is expressed by the pursuit of specific styles of life for those who wish to be members of specific status groups, and by the choices and selections that are made in reference to displays of luxury and habits of taste" (Morrison, 2006, p. 306). Social status is actively constructed and maintained through deliberate lifestyle choices, consumption patterns, and the cultivation of exclusivity. According to Max Weber's sociological framework, status groups are formed based on shared habits, tastes, and access to particular goods or behaviours that signify group identity. These groups distinguish themselves by adhering to specific lifestyles, characterised by preferences for luxury and unique consumption patterns. Such choices function as markers of identity and exclusivity, signalling both membership within the group and a conscious effort to differentiate from others. Building on these concepts, the research underscores that informal women workers can be seen as a status group characterised by their preference for modesty and simplicity in wedding planning. The study does not attempt to assess whether these workers hold a high or low social status. Rather, it only discovers that these female employees may constitute a social class by consuming and favouring modest or non-luxurious form of wedding. The report only emphasises that they had a basic and straightforward wedding, without delving into complex understandings of their relative status in relation to workers in other sectors.

Wedding Decoration Budget and Preferred Themes

When it comes to wedding decorations, the majority of respondents showed a clear preference for modest or basic budgets, reflecting both financial constraints and cultural values. Half of the women surveyed (25 respondents) preferred to spend less than INR 50,000 on decorations, while 48% (24 respondents) were comfortable with a budget between INR 50,000 and INR 1,00,000. Only 1 respondent indicated a willingness to spend between INR 1,00,000 and INR 3,00,000, and none expressed plans to exceed that amount. It is important to recognise that wedding decorations serve as symbolic goods, representing a form of consumption or possession accessible only to specific groups of people whose habits and tastes distinguish them from the broader population. According to the data, while respondents recognised the growing trend of extravagant spending on wedding decorations, they believed such expenditures should align with their status and financial capacity. They rejected the notion of excessive spending simply to adhere to societal trends, viewing it as unnecessary and potentially harmful. Instead, they emphasised acting within their means, cautioning that overspending on weddings could result in debt and undesirable long-term consequences. This aligns with Veblen's observation that since the consumption of these more excellent goods is an evidence of wealth, it becomes honorific; and conversely, the failure to consume in due quantity and quality becomes a mark of inferiority and demerit" (Veblen, 2005, p. 24). Moreover, this perspective echoes Weber's concept of status groups, where lifestyle choices, including consumption patterns, are closely tied to social identity and status (Weber, 1978, p. 306). By choosing to spend within their means, respondents not only resist the pressures of conspicuous consumption but also reaffirm their identity within a status group that values modesty and financial prudence. This suggests that informal women workers view spending large sums on wedding decorations as a way of consuming luxury goods, symbolising wealth and social status, which brings honour and respect. However, they stress the importance of matching expenditures to their financial situation, resisting societal pressures to overspend in order to avoid debt, in line with Veblen's criticism of conspicuous consumption as a marker of status.

This budget-conscious approach is further reflected in the respondents' preferred decoration themes. A significant 46% (23) of respondents favoured "Traditional" decorations, underscoring the importance of cultural continuity. Another 40% (20) of respondents preferred a "Simple and Elegant" theme, aligning with their desire to manage costs while maintaining aesthetic appeal. Only a small group 12% or 6 respondents showed interest in personalised, "Customised Themes," while just 1 respondent opted for a "Modern and Luxurious" decor. These preferences underscore the women's commitment to preserving cultural identity while managing limited resources, with only a few drawn toward more luxurious displays influenced by various modern trends. The majority's preference for traditional and simple themes reflects an effort to balance cultural resonance with financial prudence,

aligning with Weber's concept of status groups, where lifestyle choices signify social belonging. By prioritising modest and cost-effective options, they resist Veblen's notion of conspicuous consumption, navigating societal expectations with practicality and resourcefulness.

Cake-Cutting Ceremony

The divided opinions on the cake-cutting ceremony (50% in favour, 28% against, and 22% neutral) point to a nuanced negotiation of tradition and modernity. Cake-cutting is often viewed as a Western wedding practice, and its adoption in non-Western contexts may represent the influence of globalisation and consumer culture. Moreover, westernisation involves adopting external cultural practices, often influenced by other regions or nations. For example, the cake-cutting ceremony, which is not traditionally part of Manipuri marriage customs, has become increasingly common. This reflects the influence of external cultures, often associated with globalisation. Cultural globalisation, as defined by the rapid exchange of ideas, values, and attitudes across borders, provides a framework for understanding this phenomenon. According to Roland Robertson's theory of globalisation (1992), local cultures adapt global practices to align with their own traditions. The ambivalence toward cake-cutting in this context may stem from a tension between preserving traditional wedding customs and incorporating modern or Western elements.

In sum, the data reveals respondents' preference for modest wedding decorations, reflecting cultural values and financial constraints. Their choices resist conspicuous consumption, aligning with Veblen's critique of status-driven spending, while reinforcing their social identity within a group valuing modesty and financial prudence. For informal workers with limited resources, avoiding non-essential rituals is a practical decision to minimise costs. Additionally, the ambivalence toward the cake-cutting ceremony highlights the negotiation of tradition and modernity, where global influences are adapted to local cultural practices, as suggested by Robertson's theory of cultural globalisation.

Attitudes Towards expenditures on Attire and Preferences

The spending patterns on wedding attire reveal a clear gendered and economic disparity and highlight the role of social status and cultural expectations. A significant portion of respondents (40%) planned to spend less than INR 50,000 on the bride's attire, while an equal number allocated between INR 50,000 and INR 1,00,000, with only 20% willing to spend more. Attire available in local markets is generally more affordable, ranging from 5,000 to 10,000, in contrast to the higher-priced options in showrooms, which start at 50,000 and can go well beyond. The *Inaphi*, a traditional bridal attire such as *Rani-Phi* or *Wangkhei-Phi*, is distinguished by its intricate motifs and a tag identifying the maker, which serves as a symbol of the wearer's economic standing and social status. This modest tag, while simple, reflects cultural heritage and acts as a marker of exclusivity, differentiating those who can afford high-priced

garments from those relying on more affordable market options. As Veblen (2005) asserts, "If these articles of consumption are costly, they are felt to be noble and honorific" (p. 23), emphasising the conspicuous consumption linked to wealth and status.

In contrast, spending on the groom's attire is notably lower, with 50% of respondents budgeting between INR 25,000 and INR 50,000, and only 4% planning to spend more than INR 1,00,000. This disparity highlights how cultural expectations place greater emphasis on the bride's appearance, reinforcing traditional gender roles in wedding rituals. While the bride's attire serves as a visible symbol of status and cultural heritage, the groom's attire remains more modest or basic, underscoring the gendered nature of wedding-related expenditures and social expectations.

Importance of Traditional Attire

The strong preference for traditional attire, with 90% of respondents finding it very or extremely important, highlights the role of cultural continuity in weddings. Tradition evolves over decades and centuries, with individuals striving to preserve their cultural heritage. Traditional attire, in particular, serves as a significant marker of cultural identity. Traditions ensure continuity within a society, fostering creativity and adaptation while passing these customs to future generations. This transmission strengthens the social fabric and contributes to the survival of the society. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* is relevant here, as individuals' choices around attire are shaped by long-standing cultural practices and internalised dispositions (Bourdieu, 1973). Traditional attire carries symbolic meaning, serving as a way for individuals to affirm their cultural identity and align themselves with collective social norms. The prioritisation of traditional clothing over more modern or Western styles may also be viewed as resistance to the influence of global consumer culture, emphasising the importance of maintaining cultural heritage in key life events.

Overall, the spending patterns and preferences reflect a complex negotiation of economic constraints and the desire to uphold cultural traditions, while also revealing the social importance attached to wedding attire as both a cultural symbol and a marker of social status.

Invitations and Photography

The data on wedding invitation and photography expenditures reveals the underlying social values and economic constraints shaping informal women workers' wedding decisions.

Expenditures on Wedding Invitations

A significant majority of 42 respondents (84%) allocated less than INR 100 per invitation card, with no respondents opting to spend more than INR 300 solely on invitations. The modest spending reflects a prioritisation of other cultural symbols over material displays that lack long-term social or cultural value. Invitations, as transient and functional items, may not carry the same symbolic weight as attire or food, explaining the respondents' reluctance to invest heavily in them. Additionally, only 4% (2) of respondents found

unique invitations very important, underscoring a broader trend towards pragmatism and budget-conscious decisions in wedding expenditures.

Expenditures on Wedding Photography and Videography: The majority of respondents (56%) allocated less than INR 50,000 for photography and videography, with only 1 respondent planning to spend over INR 80,000. This indicates a moderate financial commitment to capturing wedding memories. Only a minority 2 respondents (4%) viewed it as an extremely important expense, suggesting that for many, these services do not outweigh more critical cultural symbols like traditional attire and food.

The mixed responses regarding the importance of professional photography and videography (with 50%(25) finding it somewhat important and 32%(16) considering it very important) suggest that while visual documentation is valued, it does not hold the same status-enhancing power as other wedding elements. Overall, these spending patterns reflect a strong adherence to practical financial limitations, where informal women workers prioritise essential elements that reflect cultural values—such as traditional attire and food—over more superficial or luxury aspects like unique invitations and extravagant photography services. This mirrors a broader sociological trend where individuals in lower economic strata make strategic choices that balance cultural expectations with economic realities.

Modest Wedding Budgets and Economic Constraints

The fact that (30)60% of respondents planned weddings with a budget under INR 5,00,000, and only 2(4%) anticipated spending over INR 20,00,000, demonstrates a clear trend toward modest wedding expenditures. This pattern reflects the economic realities faced by informal workers, who often operate in precarious, low-paying jobs with limited financial security. According to Karl Marx (Morrison, 2006, pp. 129-132), the economic base (the material conditions of labor and income) heavily shapes the superstructure (social practices and culture). In this case, the modest wedding budgets are likely a product of the material limitations experienced by these women, where financial prudence is a necessity rather than a choice.

Additionally, Bourdieu's concept of *economic capital* can help explain why most respondents plan for modest weddings (Bourdieu, 1973). For informal workers, conspicuous displays of wealth through extravagant weddings are often unfeasible, as their economic capital is limited. Instead, their wedding planning may focus on meeting essential cultural expectations while maintaining financial discipline. This reinforces the notion that social practices are influenced by one's position within the economic hierarchy, as lower-income groups may prioritise financial stability over the performance of wealth through lavish weddings.

Adherence to the Wedding Budget and Financial Discipline

A large majority of respondents—48% finding it very important and 18 respondents(36%) finding it extremely

important—emphasised the significance of sticking to their wedding budgets. This emphasis on financial discipline is indicative of the precarious economic conditions that informal women workers face. The National Commission on Self-Employed Women and Women in the Informal Sector, established in 1987, published a report on the unorganised sector. This report described the unorganised sector as one where women engage in strenuous work as wage earners, piece-rate workers, casual laborers, and paid or unpaid family workers. It highlighted the grim economic and social conditions of these women, noting the prevalence of casual labor involving intermittent jobs with extremely low wages or self-employment yielding minimal returns. The report emphasised the absence of job security and social security benefits in this sector. Additionally, it pointed to significant exploitation, including long working hours, poor working conditions, and exposure to occupational health risks (Report of the National Commission on Self-Employed Women and Women in the Informal Sector, 1987). Living with unpredictable incomes and minimal access to savings or credit, these workers are more likely to prioritise avoiding debt or financial strain.

However, despite the emphasis on staying within budget, 70%(35) of respondents planned to seek financial assistance from loans, friends, or family, indicating that many still rely on external support to cover wedding expenses. This reliance highlights the financial pressures placed on informal workers, where even careful budgeting may not be enough to manage the costs of such important cultural events. The data reveals a complex dynamic: while financial discipline is prioritized, the economic realities of informal work often necessitate additional support to meet cultural expectations around weddings.

Ideal Wedding Size

In terms of ideal wedding size, the majority of respondents expressed a preference for smaller marriage gatherings. The most common choice was a guest list of 100–300 attendees, selected by 25 respondents (50%). Another 11 respondents (22%) opted for even smaller gatherings of fewer than 100 guests, while 10 respondents (20%) preferred slightly larger events with 300–500 attendees. Only 4 respondents (8%) expressed a preference for weddings hosting 500–1,000 guests, and none favoured ceremonies with more than 1,000 attendees. This trend underscores a clear inclination towards more modest wedding celebrations. From a sociological perspective, these choices reflect the interplay between social status, economic considerations, and cultural norms surrounding marriage. According to network theory, individuals embedded in smaller or less extensive social networks often face fewer social obligations, which may naturally result in smaller and more intimate events like weddings (Granovetter, 1973, p. 1361). Furthermore, Max Weber's notion of status groups suggests that lifestyle choices, including the scale of social events, serve as markers of identity and status (Weber, 1978, p. 306). For the informal women workers represented in this study, smaller wedding gatherings may signify a practical

alignment with economic realities and cultural values of modesty and simplicity, reinforcing their identity within a specific status group. This preference highlights how weddings, as symbolic rituals, are shaped by broader social and economic structures.

Conclusion

The findings of this study illuminate a pressing issue faced by informal women workers in Manipur: the rising costs of weddings. It provides a multidimensional perspective on how marriage expenditures are shaped by their financial constraints and socio-cultural values. A unanimous perception among respondents indicates a significant increase in wedding expenses, underscoring the financial burdens that these individuals encounter, which complicates their ability to participate in traditional celebrations. Despite the escalating costs, the data reveals a clear preference for modest, budget-conscious weddings that prioritise traditional elements and simple decor. This inclination towards smaller wedding sizes and low decoration budgets highlights how economic conditions profoundly influence their spending decisions.

Drawing on Weber's theory, these choices signify group identity, where simplicity becomes a marker of exclusivity and cultural adherence. This conscious decision-making illustrates how economic limitations shape social practices. In terms of wedding decorations, most women prioritise traditional or basic themes, resisting pressures of conspicuous consumption. Their financial prudence aligns with Veblen's critique of status-driven spending.

The allocation of wedding expenditures on attire further reflects entrenched gender roles and cultural norms. Greater emphasis on the bride's traditional attire, such as the *Inaphi*, highlights its dual role as a marker of familial honour and economic standing, consistent with Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*. These choices reveal a resistance to global consumer culture, reinforcing cultural heritage and local identity, even within the constraints of limited financial resources. This balance of tradition and pragmatism underscores the socio-cultural significance of weddings as rituals of collective identity and status affirmation.

Spending on invitations and photography further illustrates their pragmatic approach, mainly budget-conscious approach, to marriage expenditures. Invitations are viewed as more ritualistic, functional rather than status-symbolic, while photography is valued for its memory-preserving role rather than as a status-enhancing element. These spending patterns reveal a prioritisation of long-term cultural significance over transient luxuries or status symbols, aligning with the workers' limited economic capacity and their emphasis on cultural priorities. Finally, the preference for smaller wedding gatherings with fewer than 300 guests encapsulates the interplay between financial realities and cultural values. Smaller networks reduce social obligations, as reflected in network theory, while modest gatherings serve as markers of social status, aligning with Weber's framework. These findings reveal how informal women workers strategically navigate

marriage expenditures, balancing economic vulnerability with cultural expectations.

Wedding expenditures for women in the informal sector are symbolic acts of resilience, identity, and status, rooted in the socio-economic structures defining their lives. While marriage ceremonies reflect social status, respondents demonstrate a clear understanding of the need to align wedding expenses with their financial realities, singling a shift in economic constraints and priorities. These trends emphasise the socio-cultural significance of simplicity and pragmatism in their wedding practices. The paper also highlights the need for greater awareness and support to address the financial challenges of wedding planning, advocating for environments that recognise and accommodate these realities, ensuring meaningful celebrations remain accessible despite rising costs.

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