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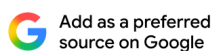
DIGITAL EXCLUSIVE

Engendering change

North East Network's three decades in Nagaland show how transformation holds only when women's voices and dignity are placed at the core.

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Participants of the North East Vikalp Sangam at North East Network's Food Sovereignty Cradle on September 10, 2025. | Photo Credit: Ashish Kothari

“No transformation towards justice is possible without the gender dimension at its core.” In various forms, I heard this over several days with members and workers of the North East Network (NEN), a 30-year-old organisation active in Nagaland, Assam, and Meghalaya. It is an observation heard from movements and groups worldwide, but not necessarily internalised in all their

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work. In the case of NEN, it seems infused in the work it does and in its internal functioning.

Started by Monisha Behal and Roshmi Goswami in 1995, NEN has evolved considerably from its early work on health to add a range of activities in livelihoods, environment, agriculture and more. It all began when Behal travelled to Nagaland for her fellowship on women's health. In 1996, she organised a workshop on the topic in Pfutsero of Phek district, in which young women from Chizami village participated on behalf of its Women's Society.

Subsequently, one of them, Seno Tsuhah, wrote to Behal about the workshop experience, prompting the latter to return to Chizami and help organise training on community health. With permission from the village elders, Chizami Women Health Centre was established in collaboration with the Chizami Women's Society. That began NEN's journey in Chizami, which I will focus on in this article.

It is important to understand the context in which NEN's work has developed. Nagaland has very strong traditional institutions of governance, with local village elders taking decisions in consultation with the village assembly. These have continued as a foundation of the currently formally recognised Village Councils, using the special constitutional status under Article 371A which enables Nagaland to adopt its own laws and accept or reject national laws—a concession made because Nagas wanted to remain independent of India and could be persuaded to join India only with the promise of independent functioning.



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Practices of mutual aid and cooperation in various village affairs, including agricultural operations, housebuilding and repair, dispute resolution, and helping in sickness, have been strongly embedded in society. Management of the commons, including forests (the State has over 70 per cent forest cover, one of India's highest), is also a crucial component of life.

Traditions, the Church, patriarchy, and conflict

The Church, active here since the mid-19th century and successful in converting nearly 90 per cent of Nagas to Christianity, has reinforced many of these facets. On the flip side, though, there has been significant gender and generational inequity (all decision-making forums have been dominated by elder men), violence against women, and traditional enmity between tribes (the State has 17 recognised tribal groups; Chizami is predominantly inhabited by the Chakhesang community).

Rampant hunting in the past (some continuing) has reduced wildlife populations to a bare minimum—I recall several walks through forests on previous visits, marvelling at the lushness and diversity but also dismayed that I could neither hear nor see any bird, except in areas where communities had banned hunting. For all its emphasis on good behaviour, the Church has

also reinforced patriarchal attitudes, discouraged many pre-Christian spiritual practices linked to nature, culture, and the land, and in other arenas enforced dogmas that discourage moves towards greater freedom and equality.



Chizami village elder KZ Mero and Seno Tsuhah, at the Vikalp Sangam opening on September 10, 2025. | Photo Credit: Ashish Kothari

And then, always looming in the background, is the history of occupation and repression by the Army and violence by the underground. As NEN members said, many families continue to go through the trauma of seeing villages burnt, loved ones killed or beaten up, and other atrocities by both these competing forces. The use of the draconian Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) has in particular caused waves of resentment and anger.

The militarised situation has also forced drastic demographic changes; as Behal notes in an article in the recent book *Community-Led Development In Practice* (edited by Elene Cloete and Gunjan Veda): “I noticed the absence of men in several Naga households. With militancy raging high, most men would seek opportunities in the plain areas of Dimapur.... Male cultivators were rare as they feared being apprehended by the Army.”

Building trust, challenging patriarchy

It is in this backdrop of challenges and opportunities that NEN's work situates itself. The early years were spent slowly working their way through issues such as resistance from many menfolk and elders, having to deal with both the Indian military and the underground, and building trust in a context where outsiders were understandably viewed with suspicion.

Patriarchal attitudes were amongst the biggest hurdles. As Behal recounts: "Women had to be sensitised about their selfhood, recognise their collective voice on rural governance, and seek equity in all domains," and that this also involved constant interaction with men.

In the context of healthcare, the organisation's work started with three Rs—reaching out to learn (from elders, other areas), reaching out to share and teach (training sessions), and reaching out to enable women who are socially and economically vulnerable to heal. Both allopathy and traditional healing practices are used, including in the Primary Health Centres, and awareness on the determinants of health—environment, food habits, militarisation, gender violence, role of the state, and so on—is a key focus area.

In 2002, at a community gathering, NEN requested the Village Council of Chizami to provide some land; after two months of deliberation, community elders consented, and this became the site of the NEN Resource Centre. By now, NEN had also realised that health could not be the only focus if overall social justice was a key aim.

So, from 2005-06 onwards, programmes were started on sensitising the community, especially women, on issues of livelihoods, unequal relations between men and women, gender discrimination, and the need to acknowledge and recognise women's work. These were

instilled along with hands-on training on low-cost sanitation, bamboo craft, weaving and food processing. Much later, participatory video training was also provided. The video clips shot by newly trained youth were put up on YouTube, giving wider visibility to Chizami. The newly learned digital education also gave much incentive and encouragement to village youth.

Seno Tsuhah says that this was also when their approach changed from one of provider to one of enabler, with more space for the agency and voice of local women and youth. According to Wekoweu (Akole) Tsuhah, who worked with NEN for about 20 years: “This was also when we realised that we cannot go it alone, so more collaborative approaches with other civil society organisations and more institutional forms such as farmer and craft collectives begun to be explored.”

Chizami Weaves: Dreams of design

One of these has been livelihoods based on traditional weaving skills. Commonly found in most parts of Nagaland, woven products have long been symbols of tribal, gender, and other identities. NEN’s contribution was to convert this traditional craft into a means of dignified livelihood for women through an enterprise called Chizami Weaves (CW).



North East Network's Resource Centre, which has been designed and built with local materials. | Photo Credit: Ashish Kothari

CW is worth a story on its own. "Even at night, we dream of designs and colour combinations, we don't use drawings, we are always imagining from our mind," says Neitshopeu Thopi, when describing how the beautiful shawls, stoles, and other items are produced by this initiative.

Started in 2008, it is, as stated on the homepage of its website, "a women-led social enterprise dedicated to creating sustainable employment opportunities for rural Naga women weavers, while passionately conserving and promoting textile weaving craft and the rich cultural heritage of the Nagas". Since 2017, it has been managed by the innovatively named NENterprise, a Public Charitable Trust (this was also the year that CW's sister enterprise, Saneki Weaves, was begun in Assam).

While in 2008 CW had just seven weavers, today it involves 500-600 artisans covering 16 villages. Training is given on the design, development, and diversification of products. It also integrates ecological concerns into its operations, giving priority to locally produced, hand-spun indigenous cotton, other local fibres like stinging nettle, and natural plant-based dyes. Products are sold in various outlets including in Kohima, with a limited stock in Guwahati.

Reclaiming food sovereignty

Food and agriculture, meanwhile, has emerged as another focal area. As Seno Tsuhah notes, 65 per cent of Nagaland's women are engaged in agriculture, but new approaches promoted by the government have weakened traditional practices like seed sharing and nutritionally and ecologically relevant cropping patterns.

To counter these trends, learning from the revolutionary Dalit women farmers of Deccan Development Society in Telangana, NEN has promoted millets (and the jhum or shifting cultivation that sustained them) as a significant contributor to good health (human and soil), encouraged the continuation of seeds and knowledge in the commons rather than privatised (including through Community Seed Banks), organised biodiversity festivals to celebrate local diversity, initiated courses called NEN Farm Schools to create opportunities for intergenerational knowledge transfer, enabled participatory videos on foraging and women's knowledge about wild edible plants, and enhanced relevant documentation.

Knowledge and practices that can act as mitigation and adaptation to the climate crisis are also encouraged. At their Resource Centre, I saw some nicely designed booklets and posters on these aspects; a Food Sovereignty hut is to become a seed bank, to complement one that is run by the Chizami Women's Society in the village.

The focus on sustaining agriculture and food traditions, including the growing of diverse crops in both jhum and settled farming, was initially viewed with scepticism by many women. They had been influenced by government and corporate propaganda to shift to Green Revolution techniques and commercial crops; or, in many cases, agriculture itself was being reduced owing to cheap or even free availability of rice and other staples from the Public Distribution System and market.

But increasing evidence of the health impacts of such shifts, and then the shock of the COVID pandemic that brought many people back to villages and forced dependence on local foods, has convinced many farmers to rethink. Outreach work and events such as farmers' markets are aiding in this.

Incremental shifts in gender relations

Have NEN's attempts to enable the agency, capacity, and confidence of women led to greater participation in the community's decision-making structures? Seno Tsuhah responded: "There is certainly greater discussion about the need to include women in governance at all levels, but it will be some time before this becomes reality. It also depends on overall changes in gender relations, with men taking much greater role in care work such as looking after children and cooking."



Seed Centre run by Chizami Women's Society and aided by North East Network. | Photo Credit: Ashish Kothari

I mentioned to them that this is similar to the situation of traditional governance structures in other parts of India, such as the Goba system of Ladakh, where women have only very recently begun to be selected as village headpersons.

"At first, we encountered a certain degree of resistance to our work amongst men—from the families of women who got involved in livelihood and other activities, from village authorities and so on," mentioned Akole. "However, while this persists on matters such as governance, in the case of livelihoods, agriculture, and other such activities, it is much less so, and in fact, menfolk are appreciative of their

ability to bring earnings into the household. There is considerably greater respect for women now.”

According to Behal, even as early as 2002, after sustained discussions, two women were nominated to the Village Council; by 2020, women members in the Village Development Board increased to six (25 per cent of total members). And in 2014, another breakthrough was made when, after many years of Seno Tsuhah and the Women’s Society trying to persuade village elders, it was agreed that women would be paid equal to men.

The kind of self-confidence generated through programmes like Chizami Weaves has also changed gender relations. NEN’s 2015-16 Annual Report quotes a weaver, Aneile Kapfo: “We weave in order to earn our living. Earlier, my husband used to tell me not to weave, but I continued weaving. Later, he started to help me in turning hanks of yarn into tightly bound yarn-balls. He also looks after the livestock while I weave. With the income I am earning, I have gained more respect from my family members. My children now look after the household work too.”

Democracy within

Treating people with respect and centring principles of democracy seem infused in NEN’s internal functioning too. There are structural hierarchies, but at least in my observation of the team at Chizami, there is more collegial decision-making, and functionaries at various levels, including those who perform daily chores, are treated with dignity. It was touching to see some of them being invited to show off their musical and theatrical skills (including the imitation of bird calls) at a cultural evening when I was there.

According to Anurita Hazarika, currently executive

director of NEN, the group's focus on women-led work has been "acknowledged, replicated and studied by various practitioners and scholars across the world". In this sense, NEN is illustrative of a phenomenon that is little appreciated by those who look down on small initiatives as being insignificant—when there is quality and commitment involved, such initiatives can have much broader impact than their own immediate geographical contexts.

Such greater reach is also part of a deliberate strategy. Realising that its overall goals cannot be met by itself, and that there is much mutual learning in building alliances, NEN has joined several national and global networks. These include Mahila Kisan Adhikaar Manch (MAKAAM, Forum for Rights of Women Farmers), Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), Millet Network of India (MINI), and Vikalp Sangam.



North East Network greatly emphasises local agricultural and wild biodiversity as food. | Photo Credit: Ashish Kothari

The last of these is a national platform bringing together groups and movements working on alternative approaches to well-being and health, education, livelihoods, justice, and ecological sustainability. It has held over 30 sangams (confluences) since 2014 across India on regional and thematic issues. NEN has participated in many of these and offered to host the very first such confluence in India's north-east region, at Chizami, from September 10-12 this year. This is what

brought me and many other colleagues to Nagaland and enabled us to experience NEN's work.

Along with others that participated in this sangam, NEN hopes to continue anchoring this process, bringing in many more communities, movements, and groups to grow the platform in the region.

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The goodwill that NEN has generated through its work and through collaborative work across India and worldwide recently stood it in good stead when its office building started collapsing owing to the construction of a highway on the slope below. An appeal enabled it to generate enough resources to build some new structures, with a meeting room, dormitories, and other facilities. The National Highways and Infrastructure Development Corporation has promised compensation for the damage caused. But three years have passed, and the Aggrieved Land Owners Group, which includes NEN Resource Centre, is still waiting.

What of the future? In the case of Nagaland, NEN hopes to expand women's leadership, including in village and larger governance structures, deepen work on nature and natural resource management, and expand collaborations in the region and beyond.

NEN states that its vision is "a future where women are economically empowered, live with dignity, and lead the way in building resilient, thriving communities". While a long distance has yet to be covered in reaching this future, NEN seems firmly set on the path and offers an inspiring example for others to learn from and spread across Nagaland and elsewhere.

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