

Lessons from the Mothers' Market: What the Rest of India Can Learn from Manipur

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Abstract

The Mothers' Market (Ima Keithel) of Manipur represents one of the world's oldest and largest women-managed marketplaces and stands as a remarkable example of women-led development. For more than five centuries, the market has served not only as a centre of trade but also as a platform for entrepreneurship, financial inclusion, social capital formation, and cultural preservation. This article examines the unique features of Ima Keithel and explores the lessons it offers for promoting inclusive and sustainable development across India. Despite challenges, the resilience of women vendors continues to sustain the institution. The experience of Ima Keithel highlights the importance of women-led enterprises, financial inclusion, local entrepreneurship, and community-based development in achieving long-term socio-economic transformation.

Keywords: Women entrepreneurship, Women-led development, Financial inclusion, Social capital

Introduction: A Market Rooted in History

Across India, governments and development agencies invest heavily in programmes aimed at women's empowerment, entrepreneurship, self-help groups, livelihood enhancement, and financial inclusion. Yet, in the north-eastern state of Manipur exists a remarkable institution that has practiced many of these principles successfully for more than five centuries. Known as Ima Keithel, or the Mothers' Market, this unique marketplace in Imphal is entirely run and managed by women. More than a centre of commerce, Ima Keithel is a living example of women's entrepreneurship, collective action, cultural preservation, and community-led development. With an estimated 3,000–5,000 women vendors and a history

stretching back over 500 years, it stands as one of the world's largest and oldest women-managed markets. At a time when India is promoting "women-led development," the Mothers' Market offers powerful lessons that deserve national attention. The origins of Ima Keithel can be traced to the traditional *Lallup-Kaba* system, under which Manipuri men were often engaged in military and state duties. Women assumed responsibility for production, trade, and household management. Over generations, these economic activities evolved into organized women-led marketplaces that became central to the state's economy and society.

Women as Economic Leaders: A Living University of Entrepreneurship

The women vendors of Ima Keithel represent a diverse yet resilient entrepreneurial community. Most vendors operate self-owned enterprises and rely on a combination of personal savings, Marup savings groups, informal credit sources, and microfinance institutions to finance their business activities. Their earnings contribute substantially to household welfare, often serving as a major source of family income. Educational attainment among vendors varies widely, ranging from informal education to graduate-level qualifications. One of the most striking features of Ima Keithel is the remarkable diversity of products traded by women vendors. The market serves as a major source of vegetables and fruits, contributing significantly to urban food security and nutrition, while the trade in fish and meat products supports local value chains and livelihoods. Traditional handlooms and textiles not only generate employment but also help preserve Manipur's rich cultural heritage. Similarly, the sale of handicrafts and bamboo products provides important non-farm employment opportunities for rural households. The market is also renowned for its traditional foods, which attract tourists and strengthen the cultural identity of the region.

Beyond Livelihoods: Building Human Capital

A key factor behind the success and resilience of Ima Keithel is the strong network of social institutions that support women vendors. Vendor associations offer collective representation and help address common concerns affecting traders, while extensive peer networks facilitate the exchange of market information, business experiences, and practical knowledge. The market also functions within a framework of shared community norms that promote trust, accountability, and cooperation among vendors. In times of difficulty, women benefit from various informal support systems that provide mutual aid and help manage economic and social risks. The success of Ima Keithel cannot be explained by physical infrastructure alone. The market thrives because of strong social capital built on trust, cooperation, and collective action. Women vendors support one another through informal networks and traditional financial

institutions such as Marup, a rotating savings and credit system that has operated for generations.



Markets as Social Institutions

Unlike conventional marketplaces that focus solely on commerce, Ima Keithel functions as a social institution. Researchers have observed that women frequently describe the market as a family and a community rather than merely a workplace. The market serves as a platform for information exchange, social support, collective action, and civic participation. Historically, women vendors have played important roles in community mobilization and social movements in Manipur. This demonstrates that markets can contribute not only to economic development but also to social cohesion and democratic participation. The market demonstrates that development is not driven solely by financial investments. Strong social institutions are equally important for creating resilient communities and sustainable livelihoods.

The Challenges Behind the Success Story

Despite its remarkable achievements, the women vendors of Ima Keithel continue to face several socio-economic challenges that affect the sustainability and growth of their enterprises. One of the most significant constraints is the limited access to institutional credit, which restricts opportunities for business expansion and investment. As a result, many vendors depend on informal sources of finance, including private lenders and traditional savings systems, making them vulnerable to indebtedness and financial insecurity. The relatively low profit margins earned by many traders further limit their ability to save, accumulate assets, and reinvest in their businesses. In addition, infrastructure constraints, such as inadequate storage facilities, congestion, sanitation issues, and transportation difficulties, reduce the efficiency of market operations. The increasing presence of alternative retail outlets and changing consumer preferences have intensified market competition, creating uncertainty in income and

livelihoods. Women vendors also shoulder substantial family responsibilities, balancing business activities with household chores, childcare, and caregiving duties, which significantly increase their workload.

Ima Keithel: A Market That Became a Solution

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of Ima Keithel is its ability to transform many of the challenges traditionally faced by women into opportunities for empowerment and economic advancement. In a context where limited employment opportunities often restrict women's participation in the workforce, the market provides self-employment and entrepreneurship opportunities for thousands of women. Ima Keithel further addresses financial exclusion through traditional institutions such as *Marup*, which provide savings and credit support when formal financial services are inaccessible. Beyond economic benefits, the market combats social isolation by fostering strong social networks, mutual support systems, and community solidarity among women traders. It also plays a crucial role in preserving and promoting indigenous knowledge, traditional crafts, local foods, and cultural practices, thereby addressing cultural marginalization while creating livelihood opportunities. Participation in the market enhances women's self-confidence, leadership abilities, and decision-making power, both within households and in the broader community.



The Way Forward: Strengthening Women's Markets

While the resilience and entrepreneurial spirit of the women vendors of Ima Keithel are remarkable, sustained progress requires supportive policies and institutional interventions. One of the most pressing needs is improved access to affordable institutional credit through women-focused loan schemes and low-interest financing programmes that can help vendors expand their businesses and reduce dependence on informal sources of borrowing. Strengthening financial inclusion through greater banking outreach, simplified procedures, and tailored financial products would further reduce reliance on private lenders and enhance economic security. Efforts to improve financial literacy and encourage savings habits can help women

build stronger financial foundations and increase their ability to invest in business growth. Equally important is investment in market infrastructure, including better storage facilities, sanitation services, transportation connectivity, and modern market amenities, which would improve operational efficiency and reduce post-harvest losses.

Lessons for the Rest of India

The experience of Ima Keithel offers several important lessons for the rest of India in designing inclusive and sustainable development strategies. First, the market demonstrates the effectiveness of women-led development, highlighting the need to promote women's leadership in economic institutions, cooperatives, self-help groups, and producer organizations. Ima Keithel further illustrates the benefits of market-led development, where strong producer-consumer linkages create opportunities for local producers while ensuring the availability of goods for urban consumers. The market's ability to preserve traditional products and cultural practices while generating economic value also highlights the importance of integrating cultural preservation with economic growth. Additionally, the challenges faced by women vendors emphasize the need for greater financial inclusion, particularly through affordable credit, accessible banking services, and women-focused financial programmes. Above all, the Mothers' Market demonstrates that truly inclusive development is achieved when women are empowered not merely as beneficiaries of welfare programmes but as entrepreneurs, leaders, decision-makers, and agents of change.

Conclusion

The significance of Ima Keithel lies not merely in the fact that it is the world's largest women-run market. Its true importance lies in the development lessons it offers. Long before concepts such as women-led development, social entrepreneurship, financial inclusion, and sustainable livelihoods became policy priorities, the women of Manipur had already built an institution embodying these principles. The Mothers' Market is both a celebration of women's achievements and a reminder of the challenges they continue to face. Yet its greatest contribution is that it transformed a marketplace into a mechanism of empowerment. Through trade, women overcame economic dependence, built social capital, preserved cultural identity, strengthened household welfare, and enhanced their role within society. For the rest of India, the lesson is clear. In the heart of Imphal stands not merely a market, but a living model of inclusive development—one that the rest of India can learn from and adapt for generations to come.

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