


## An Investigation into the Underlying Determinants of Elopement within the Rongmei Naga Tribal Community

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### Abstract

*This study investigates the underlying determinants of elopement within the Rongmei Naga tribal community in Northeast India. Employing a mixed-methods research design, it explores the socio-economic, cultural, and familial factors driving elopement, focusing on the tensions between traditional marriage practices and contemporary self-choice marriages. The study reveals that economic hardship, unplanned pregnancies, and lack of parental consent are significant motivators for elopement, particularly among younger couples. Additionally, eloped couples face challenges such as economic marginalization, family estrangement, and social stigma. While elopement is traditionally discouraged, evolving perceptions within the community suggest a gradual acceptance under certain conditions, highlighting a shift in social norms. The study recommends educational programs, open communication within families, and counseling services to address these challenges and foster a more supportive environment. The findings provide insights into the complexities of marriage practices in indigenous communities, contributing to future research on cultural shifts in family dynamics.*

**Keywords:** Elopement, Rongmei Naga tribe, Indigenous marriage practices, Socio-economic factors, Cultural norms, Family dynamics.

### 1. Introduction

Throughout history, mankind has primarily aspired to establish families within the relatively universal social institution of marriage. This institution serves as a rational framework through which individuals fulfil their fundamental need for regulated sexual relations (Horton and Hunt, 1984). Marriage, as a universal social institution, aims to regulate the family system, though its forms and functions vary across different cultures and societies. Historically, marriage has been characterized as a durable and stable relationship between a man and a woman, conferring not only a communal social standing for the couple but also a legal right to bear children (Johnson, 1960). The concept of marriage has evolved, and today it is often defined as a legally recognized social contract between two people, traditionally based on sexual relations and implying the permanence of the union. Variations in the definition of marriage include the consideration of same-sex spouses and the traditional expectation of procreation (Little, 2016). For the purpose of this study, marriage is defined as a legal and culturally accepted social union between a man and a woman aimed at establishing a family. This definition aligns with the conventional understanding prevalent in many societies and provides a basis for examining the phenomenon of elopement within specific cultural contexts. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, elopement is the act of leaving home secretly to marry without parental permission (Cambridge Dictionary). Various factors can drive the decision to elope, including the desire for a 'marriage by love' or 'self-choice marriage,' societal pressure due to an unplanned pregnancy, or economic hardships. These factors are particularly relevant

in the context of the Rongmei Naga Tribe, where elopement has become a notable practice.

Self-choice marriages, or marriages based on personal preference rather than familial arrangement, often occur without the approval of the families involved. When parental consent is withheld, couples may feel compelled to elope to realize their desire to marry (Dhanda, 2012). Following elopement, couples frequently face severe social repercussions, including ostracism and exclusion from their parents, extended families, and the broader community. These social sanctions can lead to significant challenges, such as limited access to medical facilities, inadequate housing, and difficulties in meeting basic household needs. Additionally, children from such unions often encounter obstacles in accessing education, which further hinders the family's integration and participation in society (Khan et al., 2022). The institution of marriage remains a cornerstone of social structure across cultures, though its specific manifestations and implications vary widely. In examining the practice of elopement within the Rongmei Naga Tribe, this study seeks to understand the underlying reasons and determinants for elopement and the consequent social challenges faced by eloped couples. By exploring the intersection of traditional marriage practices and contemporary self-choice marriages, this research aims to contribute to a broader understanding of the evolving dynamics of marriage and family within different cultural frameworks.

## 2. Rongmei Naga Tribe

The Rongmei Naga tribe, an indigenous community hailing from the northeastern states of Assam, Manipur, and Nagaland, stands out as one of the most politically active among the diverse tribal groups in Northeast India. As a sub-tribe of the Naga community, which is known for its extensive history and significant cultural heritage, the Rongmei people have carved a distinct identity. Historically recognized for their ferocious headhunting practices, the term "Rongmei" translates to "Men from the South." Although they have also been referred to as "Kabui" during British colonial times or "Inruanghmai," they prefer the nomenclature "Rongmei" themselves. Ethnologically, the Rongmei Naga belongs to the Tibeto-Burman family of the Mongoloid race (Golmei, 2019). Linguistically, the Rongmei Naga tribe's language is classified under the Naga-Bodo Sub-Group of the Tibeto-Burman Family, as documented by G.A. Grierson in his seminal work, "Linguistic Survey of India" (Grierson, 1994). The culture of the Rongmei is notably rich, encompassing an array of folk songs, myths, legends, and folklore, which have been perpetuated through oral traditions. Much of their cultural norms and traditions remain unwritten, contributing to their unique cultural fabric.

The Rongmei form a part of the Zeliangrong community, which includes the Zeme, Liangmei, and Rongmei sub-tribes. The community has largely converted to Christianity, with approximately 99% of the Rongmei in Nagaland and 95% in Manipur adhering to various Christian denominations (Roy, 2013). Despite this widespread conversion, a segment of the Rongmei people continues to practice their traditional religion. This indigenous faith is characterized by polytheism with an element of henotheism, worshiping one supreme God among many gods (Kamei, 2004). The Rongmei traditional belief system envisions heaven as a replica of the material world, and their worship is directed towards three groups of deities: universal gods and the gods of the lower realm, deities presiding over villages, and the family's ancestors (Samson, 2015).

Geographically, traditional Rongmei settlements are dispersed across Assam, Manipur, and Nagaland. In Assam, they predominantly inhabit the Barak Valley, which includes the districts of Cachar and Hailakandi. In Manipur, the Rongmei Naga are mainly found in the hilly districts of Tamenglong and Noney, with additional settlements in Senapati, Kangpokpi, Churachandpur, and valley districts like Bishnupur, Thoubal, Imphal West, Imphal East, and Jiribam (RNCM). In Nagaland, they have a significant presence in the Peren district and smaller settlements in Dimapur and Kohima. The widespread distribution of the Rongmei across these three states underscores their adventurous nature, distinguishing them among the Naga tribes. The Rongmei Naga tribe, with its distinct linguistic, cultural, and religious attributes, represents a vital segment of the Naga community. Their rich oral traditions, significant conversion to Christianity, and adherence to traditional beliefs highlight their dynamic cultural landscape. The dispersion of their settlements across Assam, Manipur, and Nagaland further accentuates their adventurous spirit and political activism, marking their unique position

within the broader context of Northeast India's tribal communities.

### 3. Rationale and Contribution of the Study

The Rongmei Naga tribe, predominantly residing in rural areas (Kanitkar, 2018), maintains conservative views on marriage and belief systems. Traditional societal norms dictate that a male's parents approach the female's family to seek her hand in marriage (Meitei, 2011). However, these norms are frequently disregarded by couples, leading to tensions when marriage proposals are rejected by the female's family for reasons such as socio-economic disparity, religious differences, or varying Christian denominations. When faced with familial opposition, many young couples resort to elopement, believing that their families will eventually accept their union. This act of elopement, however, often results in significant familial and inter-clan disputes, sometimes necessitating intervention by the Pei, a traditional village court with authority over customary law (Gonmei, 2019). The Pei may impose fines on the family found guilty, which could include monetary penalties and livestock. Despite these potential repercussions, elopement remains a prevalent issue, suggesting underlying motivations that compel couples to pursue this course of action. A recurring narrative within the Rongmei community involves young couples, often aged 15-18 years and still in high school, opting to elope. Preliminary inquiries reveal that unplanned pregnancies, considered taboo in Rongmei society, are a primary catalyst for these elopements. The social stigma surrounding early pregnancy often drives young couples to elope, hoping that their families will accept the situation if it is presented to them as a *fait accompli* rather than as a disclosed pregnancy. This study also aims to investigate the underlying causes of teenage elopement, examining whether unplanned pregnancies and societal taboos are the primary motivators or if other factors contribute to this phenomenon.

Elopement is regarded as indecorous within the Rongmei community, consistently discouraged by elders, parents, relatives, and friends due to the myriad challenges runaway couples face. These challenges include familial estrangement, severed relationships with parents, siblings, and other close relatives, and difficulties in accessing medical facilities, housing, basic household necessities, and education (Hussin, 2023; Khan et al., 2022). Despite these adversities, the persistence of elopement cases suggests a compelling need to understand its determinants within the Rongmei community. This research seeks to elucidate the factors contributing to the decision to elope among Rongmei couples. The study will explore whether unplanned pregnancies and the associated social stigma are significant drivers of elopement or if other reasons, such as romantic idealism or rebellion against traditional norms, play a role. Additionally, it will examine the impact of elopement on the couples and their immediate families, highlighting the social, economic, and psychological consequences they face. To date, no comprehensive study has been conducted on the subject of elopement among the Rongmei Naga tribe. This research represents the first concerted effort to explore the causes and to some extent, the implications of elopement within this community. By investigating the determinants and repercussions of elopement, the study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of this practice and provide insights that could inform community leaders, policymakers, and social workers in addressing the challenges associated with elopement. The findings may also serve as a foundation for future research on marital practices and social norms within Indigenous communities.

### 4. Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods research design, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches to gain a comprehensive understanding of the underlying determinants of elopement within the Rongmei Naga Tribal Community. The mixed-methods approach is particularly suitable for this research as it allows for the integration of statistical data with personal narratives, providing a holistic view of the phenomenon.

#### 4.1 Data Collection Instruments

The study employed both a structured **survey** and semi-structured **interviews** to collect a

comprehensive range of data on elopement. The survey served as the primary quantitative tool, designed to capture a broad spectrum of perspectives through a mix of closed and open-ended questions, enabling both statistical analysis and the exploration of individual insights. To complement the survey, qualitative data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with a subset of respondents who had direct experience with elopement or were closely connected to those who had. These interviews aimed to delve deeper into the personal motivations behind elopement and to examine the emotional, psychological, and social consequences. Participants for the interviews were selected based on their willingness to share their experiences and their relevance to the study's focus, ensuring a richer understanding of the topic.

#### 4.2 Sampling Method

A purposive sampling and snowballing method were used to select participants for the survey. The target population included individuals from various age groups, educational backgrounds, and regions within the Rongmei Naga community, ensuring a representative sample. The final sample size of 150 respondents was deemed sufficient to capture the diversity of experiences and opinions within the community.

#### 4.3 Data Collection Methods

Surveys were administered either online or in person, depending on the accessibility and preferences of the respondents. Participants were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses, which likely encouraged honest and detailed answers. Data collection for the surveys occurred over a period of two months, allowing sufficient time to compile a robust dataset. In addition to the surveys, semi-structured interviews were conducted, either in person or over the phone, based on the interviewees' preferences. Each interview lasted between 30 to 60 minutes and was guided by a set of open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed insights into participants' experiences and views. With participants' consent, the interviews were recorded and later transcribed for thorough analysis. This combined approach of surveys and interviews provided a rich dataset, balancing quantitative and qualitative insights for the study.

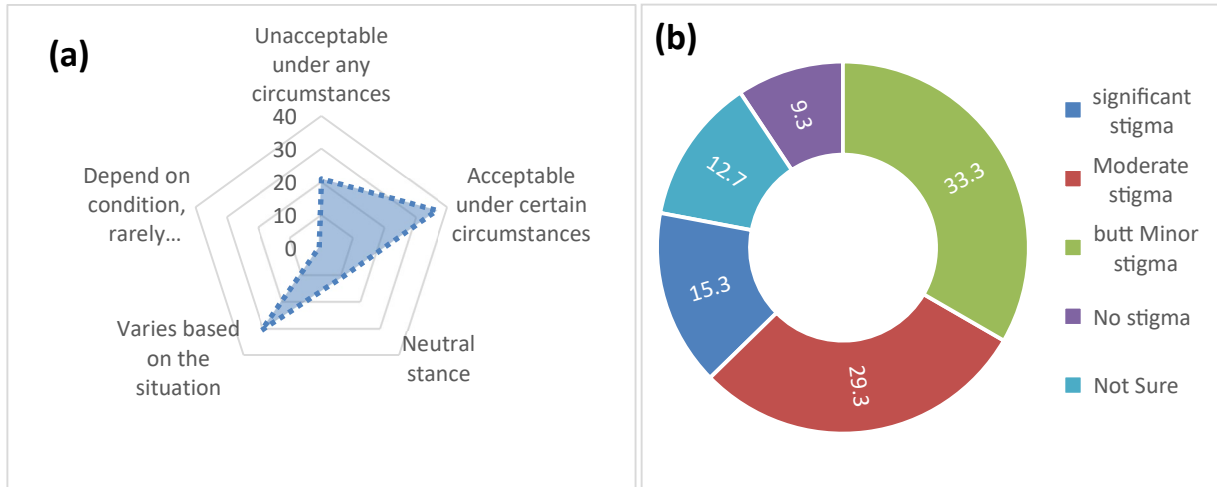
#### 4.4 Data Analysis

The study employed both quantitative and qualitative analysis methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of elopement within the Rongmei community. Quantitative data from the survey was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Descriptive statistics, such as frequencies and percentages, were used to summarize demographic information and key survey responses. Inferential statistics were applied to explore relationships between variables, such as the correlation between education level and attitudes towards elopement or the impact of economic factors on the decision to elope. Qualitative data from the interviews was analyzed using thematic analysis. The thematic analysis provided deeper insights into the personal and social dimensions of elopement, enriching the overall findings of the study.

### 5. Result and Discussion

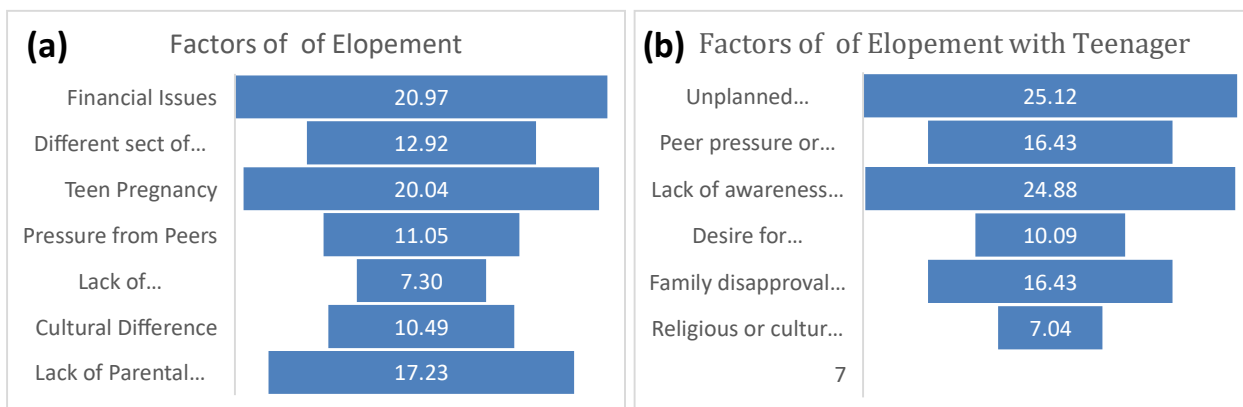
The survey conducted among the Rongmei Naga tribal community yielded comprehensive insights into the prevalence, causes, and social dynamics of elopement. The survey included 150 respondents, evenly split by gender (50% male, 50% female), with the majority (48.7%) aged between 26-35 years, followed by 29.3% aged 18-25 years. Educationally, 44.7% of respondents had completed a Bachelor's degree, while 35.3% held a Master's degree or higher, ensuring a diverse representation of perspectives within the community. The data revealed that elopement is a prevalent practice, with 96% of respondents indicating that they or someone they know had experienced elopement. Despite this high prevalence, 77.2% of respondents emphasized the importance of parental approval in marriages, reflecting a tension between traditional expectations and the reality of elopement practices. The community's perception of elopement is notably divided; while 20.9% of respondents viewed it as unacceptable under any circumstances, 66.9% accepted it conditionally, depending on specific situations (fig 1a). This indicates an ongoing shift in social norms, where elopement is increasingly seen as a viable option under certain conditions, particularly among younger generations. The survey also highlighted the stigma associated with elopement, with 78% of respondents acknowledging some level of

stigma. Of these, 15.3% reported significant stigma, while 33.3% experienced minor stigma (fig.1b). Cultural norms and traditions were found to play a significant role in influencing decisions to elope, with 60.6% of respondents indicating that these norms were either significantly or moderately influential.



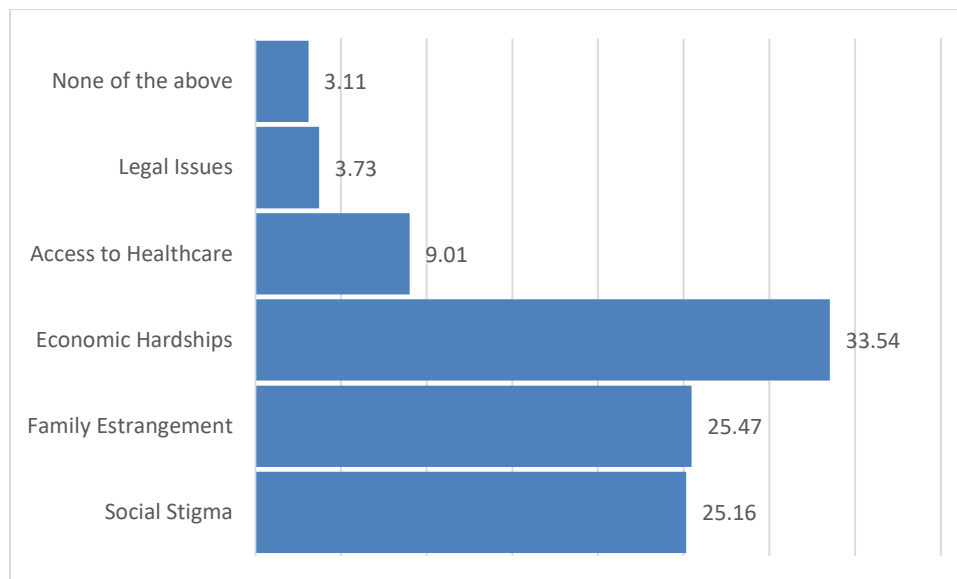
**Fig. 1:** Views of Rongmei community towards Elopement (a) & stigma associated with couples who elope within the Rongmei community (b).

Financial issues emerged as the most significant factor driving elopement, cited by 20.97% of respondents. Other critical factors included teen pregnancy (20.04%) and lack of parental consent (17.23%), highlighting the socio-economic pressures and family dynamics that contribute to this practice of elopement (fig. 2a). Among teenagers (ages 14-18), unplanned pregnancy was identified as the primary cause of elopement by 25.12% of respondents (Fig. 2b), followed closely by a lack of awareness about the consequences of elopement (24.88%) and peer pressure (16.43%). The survey also shed light on the challenges faced by eloped couples within the Rongmei community. Economic hardships were the most commonly reported challenge (33.54%), followed by family estrangement (25.47%) and social stigma (25.16%) followed by lack of access to health care and legal issue (Fig. 3). These findings underscore the significant social and economic consequences that eloped couples face, often leading to marginalization and reduced access to essential services such as healthcare.



**Fig. 2:** Factor of Elopement by Respondent among Adult (a) and Teenagers 14-18 (b).

Perceptions of elopement have evolved within the community, with 35.6% of respondents noting that it has become more acceptable over time, while 31.5% believe it remains unchanged, and 17.4% feel it has become more stigmatized. These mixed views reflect the community’s ongoing struggle to reconcile traditional values with modern influences. Respondents also provided several recommendations for addressing the issue of elopement, emphasizing the need for educational programs about its consequences (20.86%), fostering open communication within families (19.60%), and offering counseling and support services (19.42%). The survey results depict a community in transition, grappling with the tensions between traditional expectations and the pressures of modern life (Fig. 9). While elopement remains a prevalent practice, driven largely by economic hardships and social pressures, there is a clear recognition of the need for proactive measures to support young couples and mitigate the negative consequences associated with this practice.



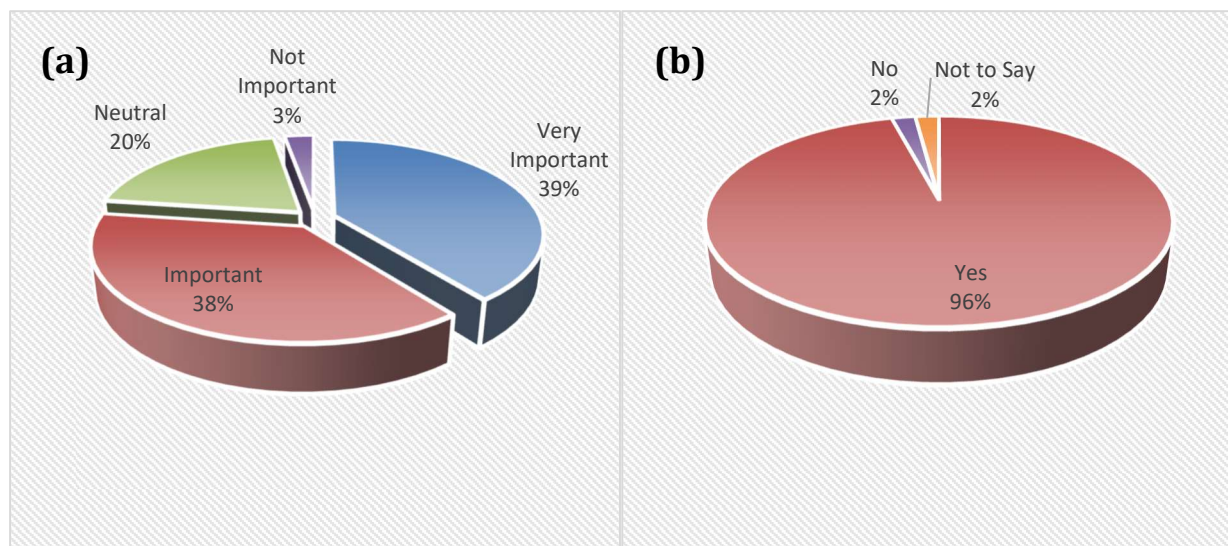
**Fig. 3:** challenges faced by eloped couples within the Rongmei Community.

## 6. Discussion

The phenomenon of elopement within the Rongmei Naga tribal community is a complex and deeply rooted cultural practice, intertwined with the community’s social, economic, and religious fabric. The survey results shed light on the multifaceted nature of elopement, revealing not only its prevalence but also the diverse factors influencing its occurrence and the community’s evolving perception of this practice.

### 6.1 Cultural and Social Context of Elopement

Elopement in the Rongmei Naga community cannot be understood in isolation from the broader cultural and social context. Traditionally, marriage in this community, as in many others, is a social contract that involves not just the couple but also their families and, by extension, the community at large. Parental approval has long been considered essential, as it reflects the community’s endorsement of the union. The survey results underscore this, with 77.2% of respondents emphasizing the importance of parental approval in marriages. However, the high prevalence of elopement, reported by 96% of respondents, indicates a significant divergence from this tradition, suggesting underlying tensions between individual desires and communal expectations.



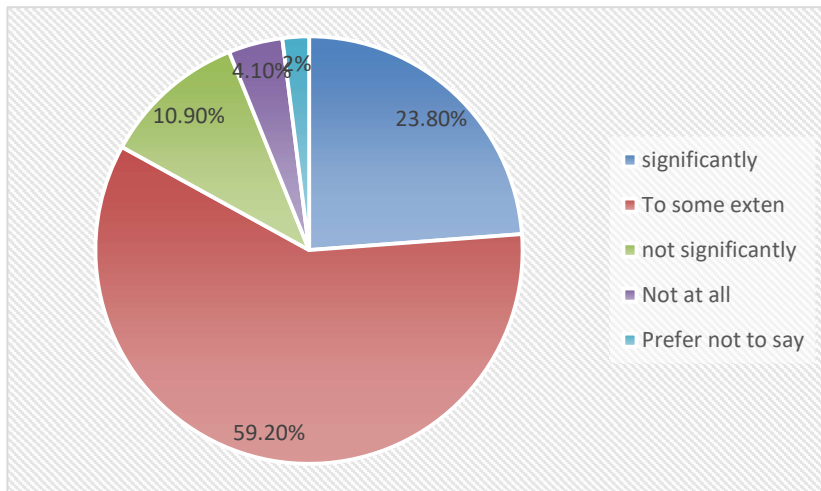
**Fig. 4:** Importance is given to parental approval in marriage (a) & knowing or experienced Elopement by the respondent within the Rongmei Community (b).

The community's perception of elopement is notably ambivalent. While a segment of the population views it as unacceptable (20.9%), a larger portion (36.7%) sees it as conditionally acceptable depending on certain circumstances (Fig. 1a). This reflects a community in transition, where traditional values are being questioned and, in some cases, redefined. The acceptance of elopement under certain conditions may indicate a pragmatic adaptation to changing social realities, such as economic pressures and the desire for personal autonomy, particularly among the younger generation.

### 6.2 Economic Factors and Elopement

Economic hardship emerged as a significant factor driving elopement, with 59.2% of respondents citing financial issues as a cause while 23.8% of respondents significantly agreed that it is a major concern (Fig.5). This is further corroborated by the fact that economic hardships are also the most commonly reported challenge faced by eloped couples. In a community where traditional marriage practices may involve significant financial outlays for ceremonies and dowries, elopement can be seen as a way to circumvent these costs. However, the subsequent economic challenges faced by eloped couples suggest that while elopement may reduce immediate financial burdens, it does not resolve underlying economic vulnerabilities. It may exacerbate them, particularly if the couple lacks familial support.

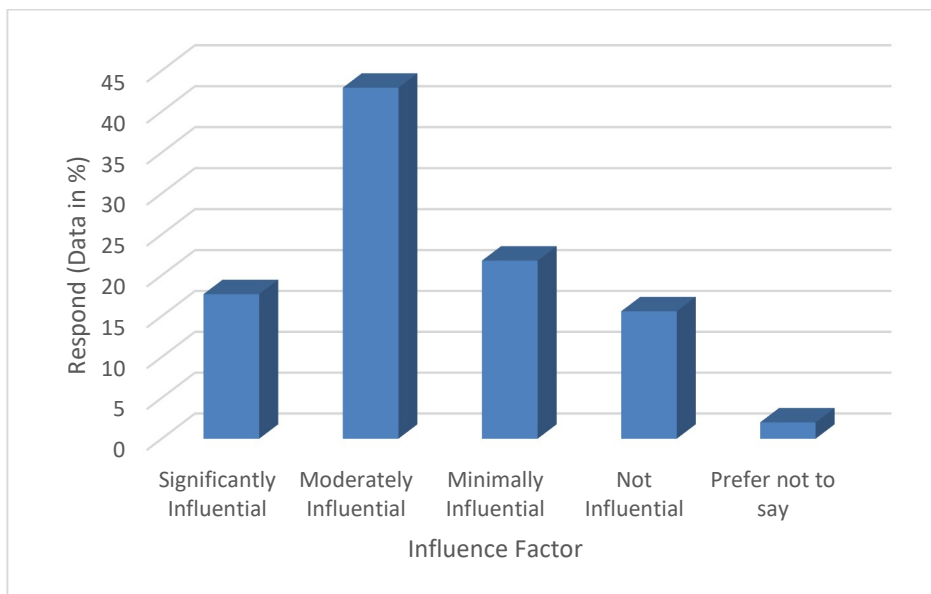
The intersection of economic and cultural factors is also evident in the influence of parental consent. Lack of parental consent, reported by 17.23% of respondents as a cause of elopement often stems from economic considerations, such as the inability to meet dowry demands or the family's financial instability (Fig. 2a). Another significant observation between economic condition and elope within the Rongmei community is that 59.2% respondent agree to some extent while 23.8% respondent perceived it's as significantly linked (Fig. 5). This indicates that economic pressures not only drive individuals to elope but also create barriers to obtaining familial approval, thus perpetuating a cycle of economic and social marginalization.



**Fig. 5:** Contribution of Economic factor to elope within the Rongmei Community.

### 6.3 Impact of Religious and Cultural Norms

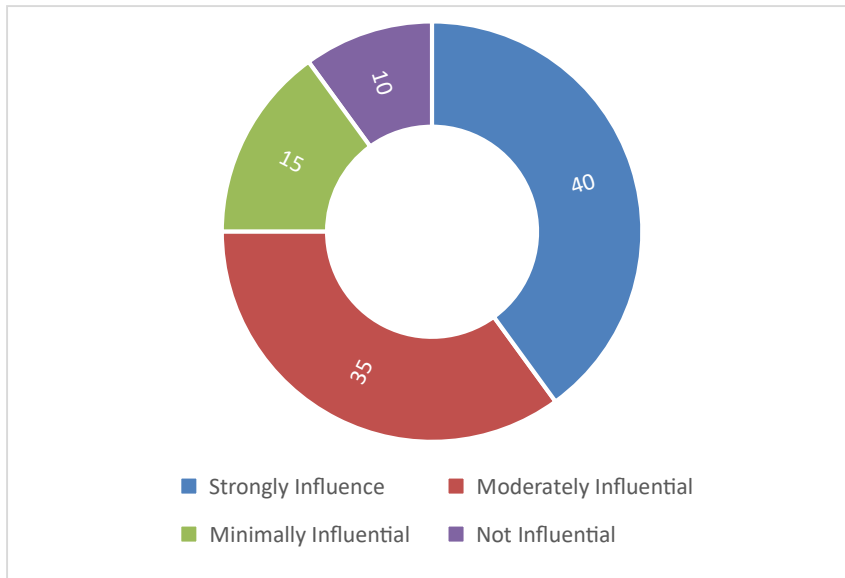
Religious and cultural norms play a dual role in both promoting and mitigating elopement within the Rongmei community. On one hand, 42.9% of respondents identified cultural norms as "Moderately Influential" in decisions to elope, suggesting that traditional beliefs and practices continue to exert significant influence (Fig. 6). On the other hand, the evolution of these norms is evident in the survey responses, with 35.6% of respondents indicating that elopement has become more acceptable over time.



**Fig. 6:** Influence of cultural norms and traditions for couples to elope.

This shift may be attributed to the growing influence of modern, individualistic values, particularly among younger community members, who may prioritize personal happiness and autonomy over traditional

expectations. However, this shift is not uniform, as 17.4% of respondents believe that elopement has become more stigmatized, indicating a pushback from more conservative elements within the community.

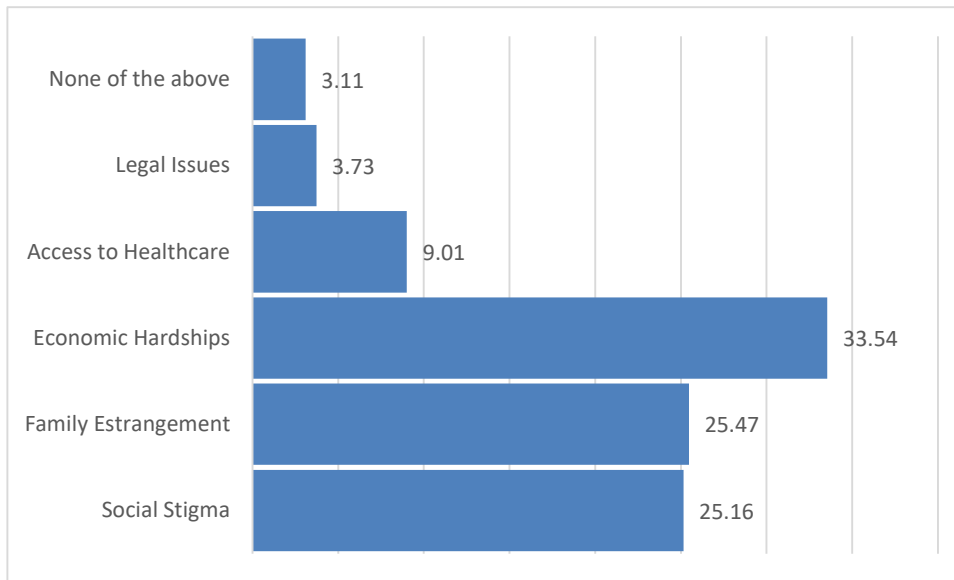


**Fig. 7:** Religious beliefs influence marriage decisions within the Rongmei community.

The role of religion is also significant, with 40% of respondents stating that religious beliefs "Strongly Influence" marriage decisions and societal expectations (Fig. 7). This highlights the tension between traditional practices, such as elopement, which may have been more accepted in pre-Christian times, and the moral teachings of contemporary Christianity, which often emphasize the sanctity of marriage and parental approval. The survey responses suggest that this religious influence has not fully displaced traditional practices, but rather coexists with them, creating a complex moral landscape for young couples navigating marriage decisions.

#### 6.4 Challenges Faced by Eloped Couples

Eloped couples in the Rongmei community face a myriad of challenges, reflecting the social, economic, and familial repercussions of their decision (Fig. 8). The most significant challenges reported include economic hardships (33.54%), family estrangement (25.47%), and social stigma (25.16%). These challenges are indicative of the broader consequences of elopement, which extend beyond the couple to their families and the community. Economic hardship, as the most frequently reported challenge, underscores the precarious position of eloped couples, who often lack the financial and social support that traditionally married couples might receive. This hardship can be exacerbated by the loss of familial support, as family estrangement often accompanies elopement. This isolation not only deprives the couple of emotional support but also removes them from the economic safety net that extended family structures typically provide in tribal communities.

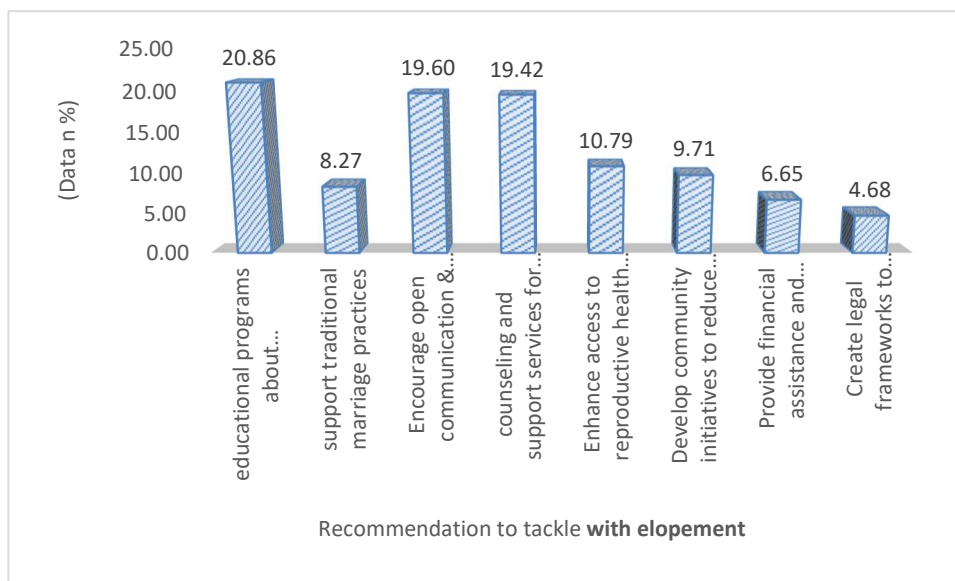


**Fig. 8: Influence of cultural norms and traditions for couples to elope.**

Social stigma further compounds these difficulties. While the survey indicates that stigma is not uniformly experienced, with 33.3% reporting only "Minor Stigma," the presence of any stigma can have profound effects on the couple's social standing and mental health. This stigma can lead to social ostracization, limiting the couple's access to community resources and support networks. It may also influence the couple's children, perpetuating a cycle of marginalization.

#### 6.5 Evolution of Elopement Perception and Community Response

The survey reveals a community grappling with the changing nature of elopement. While a significant portion of respondents believe that elopement has become more acceptable over time, there remains a substantial group that sees little change or an increase in stigmatization. This divergence in views suggests that the Rongmei community is at a crossroads, with some members embracing modern, individualistic values, while others cling to traditional norms. This evolving perception is critical for community leaders, policymakers, and social workers to understand as they develop strategies to address elopement. The recommendations provided by survey respondents—such as implementing educational programs (20.86%), encouraging open communication within families (19.60%), and offering counseling services (19.42%)—reflect a desire for proactive engagement with the issue (Fig.9). These strategies aim not only to reduce the incidence of elopement but also to mitigate its negative consequences by fostering a more supportive and understanding community environment.



**Fig. 9: Influence of cultural norms and traditions for couples to elope.**

The emphasis on education and open communication is particularly significant. It suggests a recognition that many of the underlying causes of elopement, such as unintended pregnancies and financial instability, could be addressed through better awareness and dialogue. By educating young people about the potential consequences of elopement and providing them with the tools to navigate relationship challenges, the community can empower its members to make informed decisions that align with both their personal desires and cultural values.

## 7. Conclusion

This study has explored the complex phenomenon of elopement within the Rongmei Naga tribal community, shedding light on the underlying determinants and the socio-economic and cultural repercussions of this practice. Through a mixed-methods approach, the research reveals that elopement, while traditionally viewed as indecorous and discouraged by the community, persists as a prevalent practice driven by various factors such as economic hardship, unplanned pregnancies, and the lack of parental consent. The findings indicate that elopement is often a response to the pressures and constraints imposed by traditional marriage practices, particularly in cases where economic and social expectations create barriers for young couples. The high prevalence of elopement within the community, coupled with the significant challenges faced by eloped couples—such as economic hardship, family estrangement, and social stigma—highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of this practice and the conditions that lead to it.

Despite the traditional stigma attached to elopement, there is evidence of evolving perceptions within the community, especially among younger generations who may view elopement as a viable alternative under certain circumstances. This shift underscores the tension between maintaining traditional values and adapting to contemporary realities, including the desire for personal autonomy and the influence of modern, individualistic values. To address the challenges associated with elopement, the study recommends several proactive measures. These include enhancing educational programs to raise awareness about the consequences of elopement, fostering open communication within families to reduce conflicts and misunderstandings, and providing counseling and support services to assist young couples. By implementing these strategies, community leaders and policymakers can better support the Rongmei Naga community in navigating the complexities of marriage and elopement, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and supportive environment for all its members.

The study contributes to the broader understanding of marital practices within indigenous communities, particularly in the context of the Rongmei Naga tribe. It serves as a foundation for future research on the evolving dynamics of marriage and family within different cultural frameworks, offering insights that are relevant not only to the Rongmei Naga community but also to other indigenous and tribal groups facing similar challenges.

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