
Women Musicians in Bars and Restaurants: Perspective from North-East India

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Abstract

This exploratory study delves into the diverse roles and experiences of women performers in bars and restaurants across the north-eastern states of Sikkim, Assam, Meghalaya, and Nagaland. Employing qualitative research methods, it thoroughly examines the contributions of female musicians in the North-east Indian bar and restaurant industry. The study provides detailed insights into the challenges and gender dynamics encountered within this professional context. Utilizing structured survey questionnaires and in-depth interviews, the research investigates the socio-economic and gender dynamics of women's involvement in these lively spaces. Thematic coding and constant comparative analysis reveal emerging patterns and themes, offering a nuanced understanding of the economic implications, gender dynamics, and regional uniqueness shaping the experiences of women performers. As exploratory in nature, this research not only enriches the academic conversation on the musical landscape of Northeast India but also sparks further exploration into the intricate roles of women in the performing arts within this culturally diverse region.

Keywords: Women Performers, Bars and Restaurants, North East India, Socio-Economic Insights

INTRODUCTION

In the rich and diverse musicscape of Northeast India, where cultural expressions weave seamlessly with the vibrant color of traditions, the music in bars and restaurants emerges as a fascinating intersection of art, commerce, and cultural identity. This region, encompassing states like Sikkim, Assam, Meghalaya, and

Nagaland, boasts a musical heritage deeply rooted in the local ethos (Chakma, 2020) , making it a compelling subject for exploration. The enchanting melodies that resonate within the walls of bars and restaurants play a pivotal role in shaping the cultural identity of this region. As these establishments become platforms for artistic expression, they transcend mere venues for entertainment (Hirsch,2022), becoming vibrant hubs that showcase the unique musical heritage of North-east India. The fusion of traditional and contemporary elements within these performances not only captivates audiences but also serves as a dynamic reflection of the evolving cultural landscape. Moreover, the significance of music in bars and restaurants extends beyond artistic expression; it intersects with the economic dimensions of the region (Rommen,2014) particularly in the context of tourism (Lashua,2014). As the North-east gains prominence as a sought-after tourist destination, the musical ambiance in these establishments becomes a compelling factor that draws visitors into an immersive cultural experience (Burman,2007). The soundscape of these spaces, enriched by the performances of women artists, becomes an integral part of the touristic allure (Edensor,2009), contributing to the overall appeal of the region. This study seeks to unravel the intricate connections between the musicscape of Northeast India, the role of women performers in bars and restaurants, and the burgeoning importance of tourism. By delving into the symbiotic relationship between cultural expression, gender dynamics, and the tourism industry, the research aims to illuminate the multifaceted nature of this musical journey and its implications for the social and economic fabric of North-east India.

The study area, encompassing the states of Sikkim, Assam, Meghalaya, and Nagaland in Northeast India, is of profound significance due to its rich cultural diversity and dynamic fusion of traditional and contemporary elements (Sarkar,2020). Each state within this region contributes distinct flavors to the cultural mosaic, creating a vibrant tapestry that serves as a microcosm of India's varied heritage. Women performers in the states play a crucial role within the context of bars and restaurants (Ketchum,2022). As the region gains prominence as a tourist destination, the significance of these performers extends beyond artistic expression, playing a pivotal role in attracting and captivating tourists (Lashley,2008).



Figure 1 Study Area (Sikkim, Assam, Meghalaya and Nagaland)

The economic implications are also noteworthy, as bars and restaurants contribute not only to the local music scene but also to the livelihoods of performers and the broader regional economy. Moreover, the study area provides a nuanced lens through which to examine societal perceptions, gender dynamics, and the evolving cultural identity of North-east India. Each state within this region adds its own layer of regional distinctiveness, offering a compelling context to unravel the multifaceted interactions between cultural expression, economic dynamics, and societal norms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The participation of women in professional music has received growing scholarly attention within ethnomusicology, gender studies, and cultural sociology. Earlier scholarship largely examined women musicians through the lenses of classical traditions, folk performance, and ritual practices, often overlooking their participation in commercial entertainment spaces such as bars, restaurants, cafés, clubs, and hotels. Feminist scholars have argued that music-making is embedded within broader social structures where gender shapes access to opportunities, professional recognition, and economic mobility. Studies by Green (1997), McClary (1991), and Cusick (1994) demonstrate that women's musical labour has historically been undervalued due to patriarchal norms that associate public performance with moral scrutiny while simultaneously privileging male musicians in professional spaces. These works provide a theoretical foundation for understanding how gender influences the careers of women performers beyond formal concert settings.

Research on the informal and commercial music economy has expanded over the past two decades, highlighting how live entertainment venues constitute important sites of cultural production and livelihood. Bar and restaurant performances have increasingly become spaces where musicians negotiate artistic identity alongside commercial demands. Bennett (2000) and Peterson and Bennett (2004) argue that local music scenes are shaped by interactions between performers, audiences, venue owners, and market forces, creating distinct cultural ecologies that influence artistic practices. Studies on hospitality entertainment further suggest that musicians working in restaurants and nightlife venues often experience precarious employment characterised by irregular income, absence of contractual security, and dependence on audience preferences (Behr, Brennan, and Cloonan, 2016). However, much of this literature focuses on urban music industries in Europe and North America, with relatively limited attention to the experiences of women performers in India.

Within the Indian context, scholarship on women musicians has primarily concentrated on classical performers, cinema singers, and folk artists. Research has examined women's struggles for visibility within patriarchal musical institutions, unequal access to training, and the negotiation of respectability in public performance (Weidman, 2006; Qureshi, 2006). Although these studies illuminate gendered barriers in musical professions, they rarely address women employed in commercial hospitality venues. The existing literature tends to privilege elite performance traditions while overlooking everyday musical labour that sustains the livelihoods of thousands of professional performers across urban and tourist centres. The North-East Indian region presents a distinctive cultural landscape where music forms an integral component of social life, youth culture, and the creative economy. States such as Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland, and Sikkim possess vibrant live music cultures influenced by indigenous traditions, Christian missionary music, Western popular genres, Nepali musical practices, Bollywood repertoires, and contemporary fusion styles. Scholars including Bareh (2001), Duncan McDuie-Ra (2017), and Tilottama Misra (2011) have observed that music functions as an important marker of identity, modernity, and regional expression in the North-East. The emergence of cafés, pubs, restaurants, hotels, and tourism-related entertainment has created new performance opportunities, particularly for young

musicians. Nevertheless, academic discussions have largely focused on festivals, popular music movements, rock cultures, and identity politics rather than on everyday commercial performance spaces.

Another important strand of literature concerns cultural labour and the gig economy. Digital platforms, social media, and online promotion have transformed musicians' careers by enabling performers to market themselves independently while continuing to rely on live performances as a primary source of income. Scholars such as Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011) argue that creative work is characterised by flexibility and self-expression but is simultaneously marked by insecurity, emotional labour, and unequal power relations. For women musicians in bars and restaurants, these dynamics intersect with gender discrimination, workplace safety, and audience expectations, creating unique professional experiences that require contextual investigation. The literature also reveals significant regional disparities in research on music and gender within India. Most empirical studies are concentrated in metropolitan cities such as Mumbai, Delhi, Bengaluru, Kolkata, and Chennai, leaving peripheral regions relatively underexplored. The North-East, despite its rich musical heritage and expanding hospitality sector, has received limited scholarly attention regarding women musicians' employment experiences, income patterns, workplace challenges, professional aspirations, and strategies of resilience. Consequently, there remains little comparative evidence across states such as Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland, and Sikkim, where socio-cultural contexts, tourism economies, and musical traditions differ substantially.

RESEARCH GAP AND OBJECTIVES

Despite the growing recognition of the vibrant musicscape of Northeast India, there exists a noticeable research gap in understanding the nuanced experiences and challenges faced by women performers in bars and restaurants across the states of Sikkim, Assam, Meghalaya, and Nagaland. While existing studies touch upon the broader cultural and economic aspects of music in the region, there is a scarcity of research specifically delving into the gendered dimensions within these performance spaces. Additionally, in the context of women performers there is an opportunity to unearth the unique contributions and challenges the women musicians encounter in the bars and restaurants (Jordan, 2006). Furthermore, the regional distinctiveness of each state, with its diverse traditions and languages, has not been sufficiently examined in relation to the roles and experiences of women performers in bars and restaurants. Addressing these gaps is crucial for a more comprehensive understanding of the socio-cultural, economic, and gender dynamics shaping the musicscape of North-east India. Hence the research was carried out with the following objectives:

- a. to investigate the socio-economic implications of women performers' engagement in bars and restaurants.
- b. to examine the role of women performers in enhancing the touristic appeal of Northeast India.
- c. to investigate the regional distinctiveness of each state (Sikkim, Assam, Meghalaya, and Nagaland) within Northeast India.

METHODOLOGY

A diverse range of qualitative methods was employed to delve into the multifaceted world of women performers in bars and restaurants (Moffitt, 2011) across Northeast India. To ensure a comprehensive representation, a purposive sampling approach selected women performers across states of Sikkim, Assam, Meghalaya, and Nagaland, spanning various musical genres. In-depth interviews, conducted in private settings, utilized semi-structured guides, allowing participants to candidly share their experiences, challenges, and perceptions. Direct observations of live performances enriched the study by providing a contextual understanding of artistic expressions and audience interactions (Dalsgaard, 2008). Field notes documented the atmosphere, audience dynamics, and unique elements of the performances. The study

utilized focused group discussions (FGD), offering a conducive and comfortable environment for women participants to openly share their experiences (Cameron,2005). This approach created a friendly atmosphere that facilitated more meaningful and detailed insights, promoting a collaborative and supportive space for the women to express their thoughts and narratives (Hennink,2013). Given the sensitivity of the issues at hand, utmost care is taken to ensure the comfort and willingness of the respondents. This involves creating an environment that encourages openness and candid responses, fostering a space where participants feel at ease sharing their perspectives and experiences during the study. Thematic coding, derived through an iterative process, facilitated the analysis of qualitative data, capturing recurring themes related to the experiences and challenges faced by women performers. A constant comparative analysis approach was then employed to integrate and compare themes across different qualitative data sources (Boeije,2002), ensuring a holistic and comprehensive understanding of the cultural and artistic dimensions of women performers in the region.

DISCUSSIONS

Role of women musicians/ performers in restaurants and bars: The importance of having women performers in bars and restaurants transcends mere entertainment (Wenner,1998) as expressed by managers of the restaurants across the states as “it creates welcoming, culturally diverse places that serve a range of audiences, hence defining the character of these venues”. Their contributions play a pivotal role in transforming these establishments into hubs of cultural expression, economic activity, and community engagement. The presence of women performers in bars and restaurants holds profound importance, enriching these establishments in various dimensions. It brings a crucial element of diversity and inclusivity to the musical landscape. By challenging traditional gender norms (Coffey,2023), women performers contribute to creating a more inclusive environment, fostering a welcoming space for diverse talents and perspectives. Their presence not only diversifies the musical offerings but also attracts a broader audience seeking a range of cultural experiences (Craik,2002). Culturally, women performers serve as ambassadors, representing the unique musical heritage of Northeast India. Through their artistic expressions, they infuse establishments with authenticity, turning them into cultural hubs that resonate with the rich traditions of the region. This cultural representation contributes to the establishment's identity, making it more than just a venue for dining and drinking. The entertainment experience in bars and restaurants is significantly enhanced by the live performances of women musicians (Cole,2009). Their artistry creates a dynamic and engaging atmosphere, transforming these spaces into not only places to consume food and beverages but also into vibrant centers of cultural and artistic expression. This heightened entertainment factor, in turn, attracts a diverse clientele looking for a holistic and immersive experience. For regions with tourist appeal, the presence of women performers adds a unique and authentic touch (Haldrup,2009), providing tourists with an opportunity to immerse themselves in the local musical traditions. This, in effect, contributes to the overall touristic appeal of the area, making it a destination that offers not only gastronomic delights but also a rich cultural experience.

Financial empowerment: The financial empowerment of women through performances in bars and restaurants serves as a transformative avenue within the music industry. By actively engaging in these establishments, women performers gain not only artistic recognition but also economic independence. Their live performances become a source of livelihood, providing them with a platform to showcase their talent and creativity while earning a sustainable income. This financial empowerment has broader implications, extending beyond individual artists to contribute to the economic ecosystem of the local music scene. The compensation received for performances not only supports the artists themselves but also contributes to the economic vibrancy of the community. Furthermore, the financial independence gained through performances in bars and restaurants empowers women to pursue and sustain careers in the music

industry (Cornwall,2016), challenging traditional gender norms and fostering a more equitable landscape. In essence, the financial employment of women through these performances not only enhances their economic well-being but also catalyzes positive socio-economic changes within the broader cultural and artistic community.

However, the financial involvement of women artists in the performance sphere of bars and restaurants is not without its challenges, reflecting broader systemic issues within the music industry. At bars and restaurants, female artists face financial challenges, mirroring wider issues in the music industry (Hull,2004). Unlike the common problem of gender-based pay gaps, the north-eastern Indian music scene sees women often earning more than men when regularly performing in bars. However, irregular female performers struggle due to a scarcity of concerts. The predominant presence of male bands results in women being called in on an as-needed basis. Despite having female performers, these bands identify themselves as male-centric, with concert organization and payments typically managed by the male members. Some female artists are unaware of the total earnings or their percentage share, highlighting a lack of transparency in financial matters within these setups. This can directly impact their earning potential, as these coveted time slots often draw larger audiences and better financial returns.

The unequal distribution of performance opportunities can be attributed to both implicit biases and systemic gender norms (Castilla,2008), limiting the visibility and economic growth of women artists within the bar and restaurant performance sphere. Moreover, there is a challenge related to negotiating fair compensation. Women artists encounter resistance or face obstacles when advocating for fair payment for their performances. The lack of standardized payment practices and transparency in the negotiation process contribute to the perpetuation of unequal financial arrangements (Albu,2019), hindering the economic empowerment of women in the performance space. Additionally, the issue of economic precarity is significant. Women artists face inconsistent or unpredictable income streams (Wyszomirski,2017) due to factors such as fluctuating audience attendance, seasonal variations, or the informal nature of many performance agreements. This financial instability impacts their overall financial well-being and deters sustained careers in the industry. When questioned about their commitment to performing in bars and restaurants, a significant number of respondents expressed that their current involvement in such venues is a temporary occupation. Many conveyed that they aspire to explore and pursue better opportunities in the music industry. The prevalent sentiment among these participants is that once more favorable prospects arise, they intend to transition away from their current engagements in bars and restaurants (Osborne,2006).

Social security concerns: Security issues faced by women musicians in the bars and restaurants of North-east India present a multifaceted challenge, intersecting with gender dynamics and broader safety concerns within the cultural and entertainment industry. One significant issue revolves around the prevalence of sexual harassment and objectification (Frisby,2012). Women musicians often encounter unwarranted advances, comments, or objectification, creating an unsafe and uncomfortable work environment. Even though women in North-eastern societies generally experience more freedom and safety compared to other regions (Choudhury,2022), they still face specific challenges. One notable concern revolves around the safety of women performers in bars and restaurants, primarily stemming from tourists visiting from outside the states (Baum,2013). Instances of tourists becoming drunk and engaging in harassment of women performers (Seow,2020) in these establishments are unfortunately frequent. In similar circumstances, as reported by a musician from a renowned restaurant in one of the four states, when complaints were brought to the manager's attention, no action was taken. Despite persistent attempts by the complainant to address the issue, the situation escalated, leading the woman performer to take matters into her own hands. In response to continued unwanted advances, the woman eventually slapped

the offending tourist. Consequently, the individual involved was permanently banned from the aforementioned restaurant.

The late-night schedules of performances in these establishments, coupled with the informal nature of many gigs, can exacerbate vulnerabilities and increase the risk of harassment. Furthermore, the lack of stringent security measures in some venues may leave women musicians without adequate protection. Another security concern pertains to personal safety during travel. Musicians often need to commute to various venues, sometimes in remote or unfamiliar areas. Inadequate transportation infrastructure, especially during late hours, can expose women performers to additional risks, including harassment or assault. Additionally, the absence of clear protocols and support systems within the industry exacerbates security challenges. Limited awareness and education on addressing and preventing sexual harassment further contribute to a culture of silence, leaving women musicians without the necessary tools to navigate and counteract security issues.

CONCLUSION

The situation for women in the music scene of North-east India presents a complex picture. While the society generally exhibits openness towards women participating in performance spaces, persistent issues underscore the challenges faced by female musicians highlighting a disparity between societal attitudes and actual practices. Similar to other societies, prevalent problems include the objectification of women, the dominance of men in organizing concerts, and a consistent trend of channeling women into specific roles within the bar and restaurant industries. The influence and control exerted by men in the organization of concerts can limit the opportunities available to women, potentially hindering their professional growth within the music industry. A notable challenge lies in the consistent channelization of women into specific roles, potentially constraining their artistic expression and limiting the diversity of their contributions. This tendency to confine women to predefined roles raises questions about the broader inclusivity and equality within the North-eastern music scene.

Addressing the mentioned concerns requires a comprehensive approach that involves implementing stringent security measures in performance venues, fostering awareness and education on harassment prevention, and establishing support systems for women musicians (Higgins,2012). Empowering women performers with the knowledge and resources to navigate security challenges is essential to creating a safer and more inclusive environment within the vibrant music scene of North-east India. Establishing specific rules and regulations tailored to the needs of women working in the music industry, particularly within bars and restaurants, is paramount to address the unique challenges they may encounter. Such as, stringent anti-harassment policies should be implemented within establishments to safeguard women performers from any form of harassment (Blumell,2023), be it from patrons or colleagues. Ensuring equal opportunities for both male and female musicians in terms of performance opportunities, pay, and career advancement is essential. Thirdly, fostering diversity and inclusion programs can help break down gender stereotypes and create a more inclusive environment for women within the industry. Additionally, safety measures such as surveillance systems and trained security personnel should be in place to provide a secure environment, particularly during late-night performances. Regular awareness and sensitization programs for staff and patrons are crucial to promote respect for the dignity and boundaries of women performers. Offering workplace flexibility, representation of women in leadership roles, specialized training programs, and an effective grievance redressal mechanism further contribute to creating a supportive framework. Collaboration with local authorities and law enforcement agencies ensures a holistic approach to addressing any legal challenges or concerns faced by women musicians. These regulations collectively aim to foster a more inclusive, respectful, and supportive environment for women

working in the music industry, promoting gender equality and contributing to a thriving and diverse musical landscape.

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