

The Dilemma of Referencing Ropuiliani as a Role Model for Woman Empowerment: A Special Consideration for Young Girls

Samuel L Chuaungo*

*Asst. Prof., Dept of Sociology, Mizoram University; Email: samuel.samlc@gmail.com

Ph: 8130685198

Abstract

Role models for young girls are extremely important in their journey to becoming empowered and valuable members of society. The choice of the role model thus becomes highly imperative for educators in determining curricula. This paper observes that a scrutiny of role models and their achievements, such as the case of Ropuiliani, shows important nuances of empowerment; and claims that such nuances would be lost on the minds of young minds especially girls – simply because they are yet to garner sufficient life experiences; and because their knowledge and meaning-making mechanisms are highly attuned with idealistic conventional moral codes taught through primary and even secondary socialisation.

Herein, this paper would like to achieve two goals. The first is to throw light on why Ropuiliani can indeed be considered a role model and paragon of woman empowerment by going deeper into colloquially used semantics such as “bravery”, “strength” etc. Secondly, I would like to highlight a dilemma of dissemination of such a deeper and accurate understanding of empowerment to young girls. Furthermore, certain suggestions are recommended regarding the same.

This paper is part of the ICSSR special project “The Mizo Queen Lalnu Ropuiliani: Her Legacy in the Context of Nation-Building”.

Keywords: Ropuiliani, Woman Empowerment, Young Girls, Pedagogy

I. Introduction

The concept of woman empowerment has been in the motion for some time now. Tracing its roots to the mid-nineteenth century (Moon, 2025), the empowerment movement has undergone a number of waves, with each focusing on different but interconnected aspects of women’s rights and freedoms within society. These waves have addressed issues across public domains, workplaces, educational institutions, and household settings, with the fight against gender-based oppression and the quest for

equality as its crux (Malinowska, 2020; Mohajan, 2022). Over the decades, women's rights have become a major topic of discussion in both academia and popular culture as a result of the continuous efforts of activists, reformers, and researchers.

Colloquially, the idea of an empowered woman is often portrayed as woman having access to opportunities and finding success in life; this often translates to being financially independent, having agency, and having the ability and resources to stand on her own two feet. Consequently, the public's perception of what it means for a woman to be empowered in the modern era has been shaped by these narratives. The younger generation, having been exposed to such narratives especially through wider media platforms fraught with consumer politics, often aspire to achieve these ideals as indicators of success and progress.

This process has led to a blurring of understanding the true essence of empowerment i.e. the end holds much more significance than (and even overshadowing) the means. While popular discourse promotes factors such as independence, financial success, and public visibility as markers of an empowered woman, we no longer pursue questions such as: what does empowerment really entail? What is the personification that empowerment takes on? What are the channels through which such empowerment is achieved? What actions and reactions indicate empowerment? Furthermore, does the community benefit from such empowerment? Does it aid or hinder the structural flow and harmony of the community? True empowerment cannot, therefore, be fully understood through labels alone; rather, a deeper examination of the code is necessary to understand its depth and meaning.

The choice for Ropuiliani as the subject of this paper is not a political one but rather a symbolic one – representative of all potential female role models. This paper will show that her independence (financial or otherwise), status, authority, or any other qualities, were not a result of chance alone. Rather than praising her as “brave” and “wise”, the paper will highlight the externalisations (Durkheim, 1982; Mead, 1934; Berger & Luckman, 1966) that did make her “brave” and “wise”, focusing on the contexts and ultimately tackling the issue of resonance with young girls today.

II. Ropuiliani: A Brief Introduction

Ropuiliani, daughter of the northern chief Lalsavunga and widow of another southern Lushai chief, Vandula (Lalthangliana, 2001; Lalbiakzami, 2005; Zorema, 2007), has become a national level sensation in recent years for her unwavering and undying dedication in the fight against the colonial empire, and was recognised so when her portrait was prominently displayed at Red Fort on 15th August, 2022 during the 75th Independence Day Celebrations (Independence, 2022). The Government of India honoured her as one of the “Unsung Heroes” of India’s anti-colonial struggle, commemorating her ultimate sacrifice in defending her homeland against the colonial forces.

Following the accidental and premature death of her husband, she took upon the mantle of chieftess. In an era when women were largely given subservient roles, Ropuiliani challenged societal expectations and emerged as both a respected ally among contemporary chiefs of her time and a formidable opponent of the British administration. She openly defied the proposed colonial taxation system and was eventually captured in 1893, and spent her last days in imprisonment in 1895 where her resilience remained steadfast. Her legacy as that of a historical figure epitomising woman empowerment transfers well even in modern discourses, and is an apt role model for educators to reference (and they do) when it comes to young minds especially young girls.

The curriculum of the Mizoram education system seeks to incorporate local heroes, traditionally referred to as *pasaltha* (warriors), who embody core Mizo values of *tlawmngaihna* which includes characteristics such as - bravery, humility, kindness, trustworthiness, and a strong sense of social responsibility. Prominent examples include figures like Khuangchera, Chawngbawla, and Taitesena, who are predominantly male role models identified as *pasaltha* formally introduced to students through the school textbook titled “Kumtluang” at different levels. These examples demonstrate how the education system systematically familiarises students with *pasaltha* figures from an early age, reinforcing culturally valued traits through curricular content. In this context, the significance of Ropuiliani becomes particularly noteworthy, as she stands out as one of the few female role models who holds an important place in Mizo society and is widely respected and admired.

III. Relevant Dimensions of Ropuiliani’s Empowerment

The following discussions are drawn from Ropuiliani’s life, illustrating her exceptional and “ideal” qualities as an empowered woman, while also revealing complexities that may be difficult to fully comprehend, particularly for younger generations.

i) Chiefs as Administrators and the Freedom to “*pem san*”

Even if Ropuiliani’s rise to becoming a matriarch is attributable to an unfortunate chance, her ability as a leader cannot. Her administrative capabilities became evident during the turbulent period of British invasion when chiefs from neighbouring villages frequently sought her advice and leadership. In fact, when she was captured in early 1893, she along with Lalthuama and chief Dokhuma of Chawngtleng, were planning a strategic attack on the Lungleh Fort (Lalzarliana et al., 2025). Despite living in a patriarchal society where men traditionally managed both familial and political affairs, the elders and advisors of her village expressed no hesitation in following her command, reflecting their respect for her capability and judgment (Lalbiakzami, 2005).

Moreover, although chiefs of that period exercised near-absolute control over their respective villages and were regarded as supreme heads, the villagers themselves possessed a subtle yet powerful

form of resistance known as “*pem san*”, an act of migrating to another village often, to join another chief, in search of better leadership or better living conditions. This act of defiance towards a tyrant chief could significantly ruin their reputation as it reflects dissatisfaction towards their governance. In Ropuiliani’s case, there exist no records indicating villagers migrating away from her territory during her reign. She preserved stability during peaceful time and remains a stronghold in times of tumultuous period, suggesting that her administration was both effective and well-received (J.V. Hluna, personal communication, February 19, 2024; Dothuama, personal communication, April 2, 2024).

A minor inconvenience for educators to use this example is that, today the concept of “*pem san*” or migration doesn’t quite elicit the power dynamics between administrator and subjects that existed in earlier epochs. Modern societies, even in rural areas see the coexistence of traditional form of patrilocality and modern form of neolocality (Grujters & Ermisch, 2018). Young minds, especially the ones brought up in a nuclear and neolocal household see it as a norm, and will find it easy to comprehend the conflictual nature of an entire village moving away from under a particular patriarch/matriarch. Similarly, a globalised society is witness to the ease and even necessity of migration as a norm. One can even say that pull factors rather than push factors determine the intensity of migrations today. For instance in Mizoram, people relocate for a variety of practical reasons like employment opportunities, education, better living conditions, or the availability of resources (Hlawndo, et al. 2015) rather than an expression of grievances against authority.

A bigger obstacle to comprehension is however, the incongruence with modern lessons of political awareness and activism. Moreover, the curricula of democratic systems train and even encourage young minds to understand the power that lies in their disapproval. Such disapproval are not to result in social withdrawal but rather, in making use of systems such as police, courts and the electoral process to address and alleviate grievances. Thus, understanding Ropuiliani’s capabilities as a good administrator through the lens of migration, is difficult to resonate with when evaluated through a modern way of thinking.

ii) Charisma, Diplomacy, and Armed Conflict

From a modern perspective, Ropuiliani’s resistance against the British may appear, at a glance, almost foolhardy, given the overwhelming imbalance of power she faced in the form of the British Empire. In fact, a criticism that does come up in critical discussions on Ropuiliani is that she lacked diplomacy as some of the other chiefs in the region, and that by taking on the British, she endangered the lives of her subjects. Regarding the latter, we have already established in the earlier section that her people had no such grievances with her in this regard. Let us take a deeper look at the former criticism.

One of the most striking aspects of Ropuiliani's leadership was her ability to win the respect and loyalty of both allies and adversaries. Historical records, including those by Kyndiah (1994) and Lalarliana et al. (2025), reveal that prominent chiefs such as Lalbora and Chawnglenga joined forces with her in the fight against the British, a remarkable action considering the male-dominated power structures of the time. Her ability to forge diplomatic ties between chiefs reveals the qualities she possessed as a true diplomat. In an era where political and military leadership was mostly reserved for men, Ropuiliani had proven herself worthy of being recognised as a competent and capable leader.

Her growing influence and the alliances she forged also made her a matter of concern for the British administration, who believed that subjugating the southern region was impossible without capturing Ropuiliani and her son (Sailo, 1999). This demonstrates that her leadership extended beyond administrative competence and it was rooted in personal charisma, strategic foresight, and the ability to inspire loyalty and fear in equal measure. Ropuiliani thus can be considered brave and diplomatic as per historical events.

The problem for young minds here is that the externalisation of bravery, when expressed in legends, often takes the form of armed conflict. There cannot but be a subtext that says that if you face injustice, you must fight back. Two issues occur as a result of this. Firstly, diplomatic techniques and efforts that precede the conflict take a backseat in epic storytelling. Secondly, the definition of injustice is in itself quite grey, and has been made even more complicated by the fact that public opinions today are susceptible to false news, misinformation, and personal charisma of an online content creator who may simply be exercising his/her bias. Thus, it is quite a challenge for educators to encourage young girls to be "brave" while simultaneously teaching virtues of non-violence; to explain that not all difficulties in life equate to injustice; to explain the nuances of diplomacy while establishing that such is not "lying" or "being fake". An unfortunate outcome of a selective narration on the other hand may lead to an unbalanced or partial understanding of historical context, thereby rendering empowerment as something to attain through force, and not through calculation, negotiation, or strategy.

iii) Pride of Lineage

As a descendant of the powerful Sailo clan and being the wife of one, Ropuiliani carried within her the consciousness of heritage, status, and the responsibilities that came with it. Oral histories reveal that Sailo chiefs were believed to be "above everything, even the moon and sun," and this sense of supremacy deeply shaped her character (B. Lalthangliana, personal communication, February 16, 2024). At times, this consciousness led to a certain social exclusivity. Accounts mention that she refused to mingle with the *hnamchawm* (the common people), a reflection of the deep social hierarchies of her time (Lalbiakzami, 2005; Kiangte, 2014). Her lifestyle further underscored this divide: she insisted to eat fresh meal for every sitting—freshly cooked rice, vegetables, and meat—while leftovers were given

to the *vanlung* or servants who lived in the chief's household (Zofa, 2020). She was vocally and publicly against her sister marrying a commoner, and even at the time of her capture and her incarceration, she expected and received special treatment worthy of royalty (Khiangte, 2014). This may also be one of the underlying reasons for her absolute refusal to yield under the British rule. Although popular narratives often portrayed her hostility towards the invaders as stemming from the love she had for the people and homeland (personal communications – Prof JV Hluna, February 19, 2024; Prof Khiangte, February 19, 2024; Lalthuama, March 13, 2024; Dothuama, April 2, 2024), it is likely that her lineage marked by pride and an unyielding sense of honour is what drove her to resoluteness even at her deathbed.

Today, egalitarianism is disseminated as one of the core values that everyone must conform to particularly in issues related to ascribed achievements (Parsons, 1951) of caste, class, race, ethnicity, gender, etc. - if not intrinsically, then at least at face value. Added to this is the fact that a common lesson taught to the youth today, in formal and informal forms, is that one should maintain one's self-esteem but also to be humble. As difficult as this concoction of values is difficult to execute in itself, now the personalities of role models have to be carefully sewn in as well. In this light Ropuiliani and her motivations and achievements suddenly seem a lot shallower. How would one encourage a young girl to reach her full potential if she were not from a "proper" lineage?

Educators thus need to understand two important philosophical musings. Firstly, the signifier "pride" and all it signifies needs context to determine its acceptability as a value. For instance, aristocratic pride comes with its own strict rules of discipline, abstinence and separation which commoners are significantly free from. Secondly, a knowledge of the theory of structural functionalism would explain that given a particular society like that of Ropuiliani's era, stratification such as that of chieftainship (and hence Sailo superiority) was necessary to maintain order (Davis & Moore, 1945). The reward for adhering to the aforementioned strict rules consequently is the very pride and status that has come to have dubious value today.

We of course, live in a different time today, but that doesn't mean that one has to attach today's sensibilities and political correctness to a bygone era. However, this suggestion could arguably be a moot point as educators of young children seldom tend to be trained in philosophies of the social sciences. Even if they were trained so, it becomes a tricky affair to impart such knowledge to young girls in a sensible manner.

iv) The Institution of Concubinage

Another noteworthy aspect of Ropuiliani's life was that she remained the sole wife of her husband Vandula, which was rare in an era when polygamy was widely accepted (personal

communication - Dothuama, April 2, 2024; Siblings of Lalsangzuali Sailo, March 27, 2024). The practice of keeping a *hmei* (concubine) was open to anyone in the community, though it was particularly prevalent among chiefs, wealthy families, and men of high social standing. While even common men could keep a concubine, as it often brought domestic discord, with quarrels frequently breaking out between wives and concubines, it was primarily the chiefs who maintained multiple *hmei*, as they had the resources and influence to do so (Perry, 1976). In fact, concubines occupied a position of privilege in society. Favoured by the chief, they enjoyed elevated social status, and it was not unusual for ambitious fathers to offer their daughters as concubines to chiefs in hopes of improving their family's standing (Dokhuma, 2008).

Keeping this cultural context in mind, Vandula's devotion to Ropuiliani alone sets him apart from his contemporaries. Now, there is a small possibility that he simply was not interested in other partners, but given the norms of the times as well as the pride in the testimonies of the descendants, it does seem that it was Ropuiliani's exceptional qualities that led her to commanding respect and stature as a sole partner. From an anthropologist's point of view this is an enlightening piece of information that establishes the empowerment of Ropuiliani.

Even with all these historical inputs at play, young girls raised in a monogamous family/society will likely find it difficult to fully grasp that being a sole wife is an achievement. In fact, for them Vandula having Ropuiliani as his only wife would be seen as the "normal" or "right" way to be. For them, this whole line of discussion would ostensibly conclude with the analysis that "all" the other chiefs were immoral, and rather than see it as the empowerment of Ropuiliani, they would see it as a lesson on Vandula's unshakeable moral core. Moreover, even if an educator were to overcome this barrier, it would be quite indelicate, perhaps illegal, to explain the intricacies of the support system Ropuiliani might have provided her husband that left him no further desire for other partners.

v) Ropuiliani's Conservative Views

Unfortunately, role models come in a package deal so to speak; and their views and actions cannot be selective handpicked for admiration.

Beyond her political and administrative achievements, Ropuiliani's life also reflected the traditional roles of women in Mizo society. She was a conservative woman, deeply family-oriented, placing the welfare of her clan above all else. Her response to her daughter-in-law's remarriage after the death of her second son illustrates her strong convictions regarding familial responsibilities (Lalbiakzami, 2005). Viewing the remarriage as a betrayal of her late son's memory, Ropuiliani assumed full responsibility for her grandchildren, bringing them under her care and even granting them a separate village to govern despite their exclusion from their grandfather's legacy (ibid p.51).

While Ropuiliani's views and actions may have stemmed from responsibilities inherited as a matriarch, and that her eventual goal was that of generosity and caregiving, it must be considered here that in contemporary societies, the idea of remarriage is set in the foundation that a woman should be free from social constraints if her marriage were to end in divorce or death. India has witnessed multiple issues of social reforms for remarriage in her history, from Lord Dalhousie's Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act of 1856, to Brahma Samaj's propagation of social reforms including widow remarriage, to the present Special Marriage Act of 1954 which permits every citizen of India, regardless of religion or faith, or their marital history, to enter into marriage. Thus, the younger generation who have been taught that a woman's remarriage is an act of liberation and empowerment may develop an overall disdain for Ropuiliani due to her views and actions on the matter.

IV. Conclusion

The paper has hopefully sufficiently demonstrated that when it comes to the issue of empowerment there is a difference between semantics and actualisation; where the latter must be put in a wider historical, social, and cultural context to find its acceptability in not just modern value systems but also norms entailed in prevalent familial upbringings. Female role models and their selection as icons of empowerment thus becomes more than the simple process of choosing the "popular" ones. In the case of Ropuiliani, contextualisation and the unearthing of knowledge that follows brings about a dilemma for educators as they now have to find a balance between the accurate and the appropriate. In order to gain accurate and wholesome knowledge, the means to the empowerment must be given as much (if not more) importance as the end. Moreover, what is entailed in the appropriate is complex in its own right as lack of life experience is a very prerequisite of young minds.

Due to the nature of the content of this paper, the only possible suggestion to solve the dilemma is, quite admittedly, a challenging one and certainly not a quick one. Firstly, educators would need to take on the responsibility of educating themselves in a manner prescribed in this paper. Secondly, a subjective pedagogic tactic, arrived at through the best of their abilities, must be taken in the classroom. Following this, formal documentations of experiences, of success and failure, and student feedback must be maintained, and formally discussed from time to time as required. Only through this trial and error method of creative expressions would one derive at the balance mentioned earlier.

Reference

Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. Anchor Books.

Davis, K., & Moore, W. E. (1945). Some principles of stratification. *American Sociological Review*, 10(2), 242–249.

Dokhuma, J. (2008). *Hmanlai Mizo kalphung*. Gilzom Offset: Aizawl.

Durkheim, É. (1982). *The rules of sociological method* (W. D. Halls, Trans.). Free Press. (Original work published 1895).

Grujters, R., & Ermisch, J. (2018). *Patrilocal, matrilocal or neolocal? Intergenerational proximity of married couples in China*. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 81(3), 549–566.

Hlawndo, L., Sailo, G. L., Kanagaraj, E. (2015). Migration and development: Perceptions and experiences of migrants in Aizawl, Mizoram. In R. P. Vadhera (Ed.), *Development of North East India: Multidimensional perspective* (Vol. 2, pp. 444–525). Manglam Publishers & Distributors.

Independence day celebration at Red Fort honour Northeast's 'bravest queens'. (2022, August 13). The News Mill. <https://thenewsmill.com/2022/08/independence-day-celebrations-at-red-fort-honour-northeast-bravest-queens/>

Khiantge, L. (2014). *Lemchan khawvel- I: Lalnu Ropuiliani; Darlalpuii; Thawmvungai*. LTL Publications: Aizawl.

Kyndiah, P. R. (1994) *Mizo freedom fighters*. Allied Publishers Limited. ISBN 81-7203-025-8

Lalbiakzami. (2005). Brief life sketch of Ropuiliani and aspects of her contribution in the freedom struggle. In Lalneihzovi (Ed), *Role of Ropuiliani in the freedom struggle* (pp- 50-52). Gilzom Offset:Aizawl.

Laldinmawia, H. (Ed.). (2022). *Mi pangate chanchin tawi Mizo hnam pasalthate (Short Biography of five Mizo freedom fighters)*. Dept of Mizo, PUC. KL Offset Printers: Aizawl.

Lalthangliana, B. (2001) *India, Burma leh Bangladesh-A Mizo chanchin (History and culture of Mizo in India, Burma & Bangladesh)*. Swapna Printing Works: Kolkata

Lazarliana, J., Laithangpuii., Zirnuntluanga. & Pautu, L. (2025). *Mizo history leh Sailo lal ropuite: Vandula leh Ropuiliani*. SEL Foundation: Aizawl.

Malinowska, A. (2020). *Waves of feminism: The international encyclopedia of gender, media and communication*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc. DOI:[10.1002/9781119429128.iegmc096](https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119429128.iegmc096)

Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, self, and society: From the standpoint of a social behaviorist* (C. W. Morris, Ed.). University of Chicago Press.

Mohajan, H, K. (2022). Four waves of feminism: A blessing for global humanity. *Studies in Social Science & Humanities, Vol1 (2)*. Paradigm Academic Press. DOI:[10.56397/SSSH.2022.09.01](https://doi.org/10.56397/SSSH.2022.09.01)

Moon, Y. (2025). Feminism: Understanding the movement and its impact. *Global Media Journal, Vol 23(73)*. DOI: 10.36648/1550-7521.23.73.477

Parsons, T. (1951). *The Social System*. Free Press.

Perry, N, E. (1976). *Lushai custom: A monograph on Lushai customs and ceremonies*. Firma KLM Private Limited: Calcutta.

Sailo, L. (1999) *Tlawm ve lo Ropuiliani*. Hnamte Press: Aizawl.

Zofa, L. (2020). *Mizo lalte (An thlahte leh an lalnakhuate)*. Diktawn Press: Aizawl.

Zorema, J. (2007). *Encountering the British expansion: Vandula and Ropuiliani*