

Women's Issues in Meghalaya: Role of the Government, NGOs, and the Village Leadership

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Abstract

In a matrilineal society, where women own land, one would expect women would hold the seat of power and be treated with respect. However, while women are treated with immense respect in the rural areas of Meghalaya, India, domestic violence, child marriage, and the lack of family planning impact the empowerment status of women. In Meghalaya, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and self-help groups (SHGs) play a very pivotal role in women's empowerment by providing basic education, vocational training for self-employment, legal aid, protection for woman, and self-awareness programmes. To understand Meghalaya's contraceptive use and fertility rates despite it being a matrilineal society, this study investigated the roles of the government, NGOs, SHGs, and village leaders in educating women on the repercussions of child marriage, combating domestic violence, and the advantages of family planning. The study also aims to shed light on the importance of the village headman, as well as the disconnect between the views of the village headmen and women in leadership positions in the village when it comes to women's issues. The study was conducted in two districts: East Khasi Hills and West Khasi Hills. The following groups were interviewed: the government departments of the Meghalaya Social Welfare Department, National Rural Health Mission, and the Women's Special Cell; four NGOs; and 20 village headmen, 12 presidents of the female unit, and 13 SHGs from each village. From this case study, it was found that while there may be different perceptions of reality between the village leaders, government, and NGOs, when it came to the eradication of social issues, the three groups were closely aligned in goals. It was also found that views differed between the society's men and women when it came to the above-mentioned women's issues. These findings stress the importance of women's representation in the local governance system.

Keywords: women's empowerment, India, Non-governmental Organisations, Self-help Groups, village headman

1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, the government of India has shown increasing concern for women's issues through a variety of legislation promoting the education and political participation of women (Collier, 1998). Various international organisations, especially the World Bank and United Nations, have also focused on issues pertaining to women. Child marriages or early marriages have been a practice prevalent in India since time immemorial. Although the incidence of child marriage has decreased over time due to legal and societal changes, it still continues today. Meghalaya the study site is one of the top ten states with the highest percentage of child marriages for both boys and girls (Young Lives and NCPCR, 2017).

Domestic violence in India is endemic. Around 70% of women in India are victims of domestic violence, according to a former Union Minister for Women and Child Development (Chowdhury, 2006). This occurs despite the fact that women in India are legally protected from domestic abuse under the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (Vision IAS, 2015). In Meghalaya, 11.7% of women reportedly experience physical violence, 1% experience sexual violence, and 5.6% experience emotional violence (NFHS, 2009). Family planning plays a major role when it comes to gender equality and women's empowerment (Prata, Fraser, Huchko, Gipson, Withers, Lewis, Ciaraldi, Upadhyay, 2017).

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From 1965 to 2009, contraceptive usage more than tripled (from 13% of married women in 1970 to 48% in 2009), and the fertility rate decreased by more than half (from 5.7 in 1966 to 2.4 in 2012) (Pati, 2003). However, the national fertility rate is still high enough to cause long-term population growth (NFHS, 2006). In Meghalaya in 2001, the contraceptive use rate of 20.2% was the lowest in the country, and the fertility rate of 4.57 was the highest (NFHS, 2001). This suggests the need to conduct a survey in Meghalaya to understand these statistics.

In the past few decades, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have increased in number and have established themselves in pivotal positions in social, economic, and political landscapes globally. According to Lester Salmon (1994), NGOs may constitute the most significant economic and social development of the twentieth century, much as the nation-state was of the nineteenth century. In Meghalaya, there are over 8500 NGOs, of which 5127 are registered, and the rest are unregistered (Nongkynrih, 2008). According to Sohtun (2016), there are two main reasons for why NGOs are created. The first is to provide a collective mechanism to pursue the commitment to work. This mechanism becomes the organisation. These second is based on the requirements of the projects. Increasingly, project funds are being made available only to organised initiatives and not to individuals. In Meghalaya, there are two categories of programmes and trainings which NGOs have undertaken. The first consists of programmes related to leadership skills, health camps, political education, village development, women and development, and others. The second involves programmes for villages focusing on skills training for income-generating activities (Nongkynrih, 2008).

To understand Meghalaya's contraceptive use and fertility rates, despite it being a matrilineal society, it is important to investigate the respective roles of the government, NGOs, self-help groups (SHGs), and village leaders in educating women on the repercussions of child marriage, combating domestic violence, and the advantages of family planning. Along with this, it is key to shed light on the importance of the village headman, as well as the disconnect between the views of the village headmen and women in village leadership positions on women's issues.

This study is a compilation of data from the three government departments that deal with women's issues, four NGOs that work towards women's empowerment, 20 *Rangbah Shnongs* (village headmen), 12 *Seng-Kynthbei's* (presidents of the female unit), and 13 SHG leaders. Subsequently, *t*-test analysis was used to determine whether there is a statistically significant difference between the views of men and women concerning the aforementioned issues. The study was conducted across 20 villages from two districts in Meghalaya—the East Khasi Hills and the West Khasi Hills.

In India, the basic units of society are patrilineal in nature, with very few exceptions. Meghalaya and Kerala² are two states in India where matriliney is practised. While various studies concerning women's issues in patrilineal societies have been conducted in general (Kurian, 2004; Kulwani, 2002) and in Kerala specifically (Mitra and Singh, 2007; Chacko, 2003; Jeffrey, 2005), very little research has been conducted on the matrilineal society in Meghalaya, and thus the aforementioned research topic was chosen.

The Sixth Schedule, which is the basis for Meghalaya's administration, is described in the following section. Sections 3 and 4 describe the role of the government and NGOs, followed by Section 5's explanation of the disconnect between the male village headmen and female leaders' perception of domestic violence, early marriage, and family planning in their society. Section 6 concludes the paper.

2. Meghalaya and the Sixth Schedule

Meghalaya is a federal state in the Union of India. It is a part of the Seven Sisters in northeast India and is wedged between Bhutan, China, Myanmar, and Bangladesh on the far eastern edge of India. It is the only state in northeast India where the autonomous district councils have power over the entire population of the state. The ethnicity of the majority of Meghalaya's people is tribal. Nearly 81% of the population lives in rural areas, and more than 49% of the population living in the East and West Khasi Hills is below the poverty line (Nongkynrih, 2010). The male-female density ratio per sq. km in Meghalaya is 1000:975 (Nongkynrih, 2010).

There are two major ethnic tribes in Meghalaya: the Khasis and the Garos. This study focuses on the matrilineal Khasi tribe. 'Scheduled Tribes', the category used to describe these ethnic groups in the Indian Constitution, make up 87% of Meghalaya's population of 2.3 million (Baruah, 2003).

²However, while matriliney is said to be the essence of the kinship system of Meghalaya, it is only practised by some communities in the state of Kerala.

The non-tribal communities in the region are made up of migrants from other parts of India and from neighbouring countries, particularly Bangladesh and Nepal, and include those who have both migrated in recent years and lived in the region for centuries. Tribal areas in India are divided into the Fifth Schedule and Sixth Schedule according to the Indian Constitution. According to the Sixth Schedule, the four states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Mizoram contain tribal areas. Although these areas fall within the executive authority of the state, the Sixth Schedule gives the district and regional councils the right to exercise certain legislative and judicial powers.

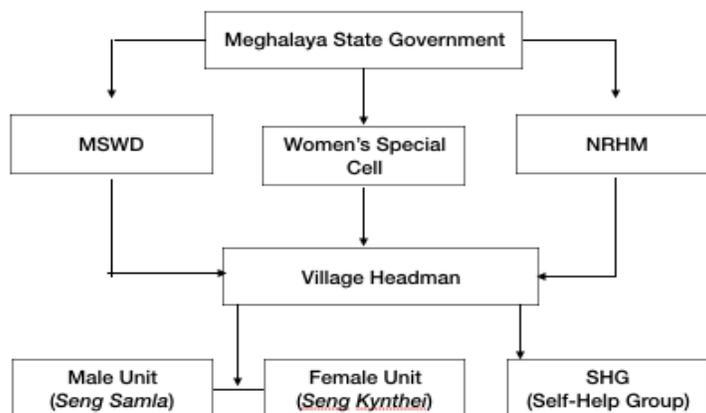
3. Methodology

In May 2017, a questionnaire survey was conducted in two districts in Meghalaya: East Khasi Hills and West Khasi Hills. The following groups were interviewed: MSWD, NRHM and the Women's Special Cell; 4 NGOs; 20 village headmen, 12 presidents of the female units, and 13 SHGs from each village. To understand their roles, interviews were conducted using the structured questionnaire method. Each questionnaire was filled on a one-to-one basis, in their native language with the help of an interpreter. Through the interpreter, contact was made with the respective government departments, village headmen, SHGs, and female units. In the case of NGOs, contacts were derived from their respective websites. All appropriate and necessary permissions were taken before conducting the survey.

4. Role of the Government

In Meghalaya, three government departments primarily focus on women's issues: (1) the Meghalaya Social Welfare Department (MSWD), (2) the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM), and (3) the Women's Special Cell. Social Welfare's main focus is on the holistic development of Meghalaya society. It aims at the social and economic development of women, children, disabled individuals, and juvenile delinquents in the state. Currently, Social Welfare is trying to focus on making the village headmen understand that women's issues relating to domestic violence should not be handled by the village but instead should be reported and handed over to experts.

Figure 1: Flow of authority in a Khasi society



Source: Author Survey, 2017

NRHM's main focus is to ensure effective healthcare through various interventions. NRHM works on a variety of health issues including family planning and maternal and child care. Every month a lecture is conducted on nutrition in every district, and mothers and local leaders are invited to attend.

The Women's Special Cell is an initiative by the National Commission for Women and Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) that conducts community meetings, awareness programmes in schools, and gender sensitisation programmes, as well as investigates cases involving intimate partner violence and domestic violence. It also investigates cases involving cyber security and briefs the police on how to deal with child sexual abuse. In cases of domestic violence, first-level counselling is provided, along with reality orientations if the woman wishes to continue the marriage and have a non-violent reconciliation. Its services were started on 14 June 2016, and the department has intervened in over 48 cases of violence and registered 12 such cases in one year. They coordinate with ChildLine, One Stop Crisis Centre, and the MSWD.

Table 1: Methods of Advertisement

Methods	MSWD	NRHM	Women's Special Cell
TV	O	O	x
Radio	O	O	x
Website	x	x	x
Newspaper	O	O	x
Billboard	O	O	O
Pamphlets	O	O	O
Other	Audio-visual guides	x	Distribute contact numbers

Source: Author Survey, 2017

'x' – not applicable; 'O' – applicable

Interestingly, the three departments often work together on various interventions or programmes, as well as with registered NGOs on most of these programmes. For example, on certain cases, the Women's Special Cell coordinates with the MSWD as both share similar goals. Social Welfare and one NGO worked together to develop the One Stop Crisis Centre, which is a support centre for women. Another interesting observation is that all awareness programmes offered by the government at the village level must be permitted by the village headman, who will then inform the president of the female unit, the male unit, and the SHGs. Figure 1 graphically shows how the administration works in a Khasi society.

Table 2: General Description of the State Government Departments

	MSWD	NRHM	Women's Special Cell
Annual Budget (INR)	8,030,000	2,546,000	-
No. of Employees	35	60	2
No. of Male Employees	4	42	0
No. of Female Employees	31	18	2
Activities	Awareness, Workshops, Seminars, Rally, TV & Radio Shows, Research, and Other	Maternal Care, Child Care, Family Planning, Training	Community Meetings, Awareness Programmes, Gender Sensitisation, Sexuality, Intimate Partner Violence
Goals	Women's Empowerment	Women's Empowerment	Women's Empowerment & Trafficking
Sector Focused	Family Planning, Early Marriage, and Domestic Violence	Family Planning	Early Marriage and Domestic Violence
NGO meetings	As required	Monthly	As required

Source: Author Survey, 2017

Amongst the barriers faced by different government departments, when it came to the implementation of various awareness programmes, the most difficult barrier was that of male participation. Some of the reasons provided were that some men felt that these programmes were not fruitful, and others were too shy to participate. This issue

was seen mostly in awareness programmes involving domestic violence and family planning. According to NRHM, it was difficult to educate men on vasectomies as a family planning option.

Table 1 shows the various advertising methods used by the three respective departments for their awareness programmes. With awareness programmes being conducted at a place outside the village, the advertising methods used by the government to spread word is of utmost importance. Table 2 provides a general description of the respective departments, as well as the activities used by each department to create or increase awareness. The survey also revealed that a significant obstacle for the government was gaining people's trust in the village. Due to the disconnect between the government and people, the departments often found it difficult to hold awareness programmes. The village headmen have a pivotal role in the success of an awareness programme as people will only attend if informed by their village headman.

5. Role of NGOs

NGOs contribute immensely towards various developmental programmes. They work at the grassroots level in remote areas, and are an important link between the people and the state (Sohtun, 2016). There are several organisations actively addressing gender issues in the Khasi Hills districts, but they are relatively few compared to other parts of India. Amongst the approved NGOs, there are four that work closely with women's issues in Meghalaya.

NGO A is the first NGO in northeast India to address gender issues from a liberal feminist perspective. It aims to identify rape cases, train individuals in dealing with such cases, increase governance and state accountability, reduce workplace sexual harassment, and provide recommendations to the government to improve policies involving women's security. The organisation collaborates on cases with the police, health and social welfare departments, and the Meghalaya State Legal Services Authority. One major obstacle that they face with the government is building a relationship with new directors who come into office to garner support for various cases. This organisation acknowledges that cooperation with the government is of utmost importance, and that has led to a number of successful cases. NGO B focuses on educating women in rural areas on family planning and assisting with domestic violence cases. The organisation works very closely with NRHM and Meghalaya's police department. They also work closely with individual women in workshops and awareness programmes.

'A world without human trafficking and exploitation' is the vision of NGO C. This organisation follows the 'impulse model', which is an internationally acknowledged, holistic method to address human trafficking. They have a presence in all seven states of northeast India, as well as countries with which India shares a border, such as Nepal, Myanmar, and Bangladesh. However, the core team operates from Meghalaya. The NGO follows the 'six R's' for the management system of victims: Reporting, Rescue, Rehabilitation, Repatriation, Reintegration, and Re-compensation. They work closely with theMSWD, NRHM, and the Meghalaya State Legal Services Authority.

NGO D is devoted to the empowerment of women and the welfare of society. The organisation conducts various training programmes for female school dropouts, single mothers, domestic workers, and women in difficult circumstances. The training involves various activities like tailoring, handicraft-making, candle-making, embroidery, knitting, weaving, flower-making, basket-making, and card-making. It conducts various developmental activities, particularly the formation of various SHGs. It also helps train a number of SHGs in rural areas in various activities, which has led to income generation and the creation of micro-enterprises such as livestock rearing, kitchen gardens, vermicomposting units, grocery shops, agriculture businesses, fisheries, and so on (WISE Annual Report, 2011). A general description of the four NGOs is provided in Table 3.

These NGOs understand the importance of the issues and work at the grassroots level to empower women while also collaborating with each other on various cases. The NGOs receive most of their funding through the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act of 2010 (FCRA) and private organisations. However, NGO D receives its funding from the Meghalaya government. Awareness programmes are conducted by these NGOs in the village with the permission of the village headman.

Collectively, the NGOs had no complaints when it came to seeking help from the government, except that the governmental processes were long. Since every NGO studied is a registered NGO, they are able to apply for governmental support and funds.

Table 3: General Description of the NGOs

	NGO A	NGO B	NGO C	NGO D
Headquarters	Guwahati	Meghalaya	Shillong	Shillong
Year Founded	1995	2007	1992	2000
Year Registered	1995	1992	1995	2002
No. of Branches in Meghalaya	1	1	1	1
No. of Branches Nationally	3	1	2	1
Yearly Budget (INR)	31,424,507	212,030	-	-
Funding & Donors	FCRA& Non-FCRA	FCRA	FCRA	Government
Goal of Organisation	Women's Empowerment	Women's Empowerment	Women's Empowerment & Human Trafficking	Women's Empowerment
Sector Focused	Family Planning & Domestic Violence	Family Planning & Domestic Violence	Domestic Violence & Human Trafficking	Family Planning, Domestic Violence,& Human Trafficking
Government Department Collaboration	Women's Special Cell & NRHM	Women's Special Cell, NRHM, Social Welfare, and Meghalaya State Legal Services Authority	Women's Special Cell, NRHM, Social Welfare, and Meghalaya State Legal Services Authority	Social Welfare
NGO Collaboration	NGO B	NGO A	NGO D	NGO C

Source: Author Survey, 2017

FCRA: Foreign Contribution Regulation Act

During the interviews with various departments of the Meghalaya government and several NGOs, it was found that when it came to women's issues in Khasi society, the presence of these issues were much higher than what it was understood to be by the village headman. While decisions to allow such awareness programmes in their society lie in the village headman's hands, conducting such programmes by the government or NGOs becomes difficult.

6. Role of the Village Headman, President of the Female Unit, and SHG

This section focuses on the overview of the role of the village headman, the president of the female unit, and the SHG in each village. After the data was collected, a *t*-test was conducted to determine if there is a statistically significant difference in the views of the village headmen and the presidents of the female units and SHGs. Not every village had a female unit or SHG. Out of the 20 villages that were chosen, 12 of them had female units, and 13 had women's SHGs.

With the village headman having legislative and judicial powers, the role of the village level assembly (*DorbarShnong*) in women's issues is important. The village assembly is the lowest level of governance. Each village unit is headed by a male village headman. He is elected by the village council, which is composed of adult male members from every family residing in the village. The village headman is required to maintain peace and harmony in his respective village. He is the judge of all conflicts and quarrels, and he can summon 'defaulters' and punish them.

The village council is the decision-making body and organises the activities of the village collectively.

Along with the village headman, the village has the female unit (*Seng-Kynthel*) and the male unit (*Seng-Samla*). Together, they form the village administrative structure. The female unit and male unit do not attend the village council meetings but are active participants in village activities. For this study, the village headmen of 20 villages and the presidents of the female unit from each village who had them were interviewed. The presidents of the village female unit primarily work towards empowering women in their village. They attend awareness programmes, arranged by the government, that concern women and intervene in cases of domestic violence in the village. The functions of the president of the female unit involve eradicating gambling and the illegal sale of alcohol, maintaining the cleanliness of the village, awarding students at school, looking after the well-being of the village, and eradicating poverty. One of the female units has its own baby day-care centre that provides free child care, which enables single mothers to work and have a source of income. This baby day-care centre is aided by the MSWD.

Another important component of the village unit that works towards women's empowerment and upliftment is the SHG, which is a group of rural poor who have volunteered to organise themselves into a group to eradicate the poverty of their members (Chandrasekhar and Lokesh, 2009). SHGs' main objective is to bring about personal, social, and economic change for its members and society. They provide low-interest loans to their target groups to develop themselves, create a sense of savings amongst the members, achieve self-reliance, and assess the individual credit needs of its members and submit applications to the bank to obtain collective loans with the help of an NGO.

Like the female unit, not every village had an SHG. In fact, in certain villages, some women served dual roles as the president of the female unit as well as the secretary of the SHG. In such cases, the female unit and the SHG collaborated to organise programmes. However, in other cases, the female unit worked independent of the SHG.

Table 4: General Description of Respondents

Description	Village Headman	President of Female Unit	SHG
Average Age (years)	51	52	40
Gender (%)	Male	0	0
	Female	100	100
Average Education (years)	10	8	9
Average Years of Experience	10	10	5

Source: Author Survey, 2017

As the head of the village administrative structure, it was the duty of the female unit, as well as the SHG, to report to the village headman. In case of domestic violence or any other disturbance in the village that requires law enforcement involvement, the duty of the female unit and the SHG is to first report it to the village headman, who then decides the next course of action and whether to involve the police.

For the purpose of this survey, the village headman, president of the female unit, and the president of the SHG were questioned separately on the degree of the above-mentioned women's issues prevalent in their society. The degree varied from 1-5: where 1 was the least and 5 was the most. Table 4 shows a general description of the respondents.

An independent t-test was conducted to compare the views of men and women on the three issues in Khasi society: family planning, domestic violence, and early marriage. Table 5 displays the results of the t-test. It was interesting to see the difference in views of the two genders regarding various women's issues that are prevalent in their society. There was a significant difference between the views of men (mean= 3.15, St.Dev= 0.50) and the views of women (mean= 3.8, St.Dev= 1.25) when it came to family planning. While the village headmen mostly felt that family planning was not required in their respective villages, according to the Meghalaya Times (2017), the lack of awareness programmes on the issue is a pressing matter, as expressed by the chairperson of the State Commission for Protection of Child Rights. This view of the importance of family planning programmes were shared by Khasi women as well. Through the interviews conducted, it was found that women were keen on being part of the village administrative body.

Table 5: T-test Analysis of Gender Views

Women's Issue	Men			Women			Pr (T<t)
	No. of Observations	St.Dev	Mean	No. of Observations	St.Dev	Mean	
Family Planning	20	0.50	3.15	25	1.25	3.8	0.03**
Domestic Violence	20	1.68	3.15	25	1.22	3.88	0.04**
Early Marriage	20	1.04	4.15	25	0.85	4.76	0.02**

Source: Author's Estimation

Note: 1) **, * indicates differences at the 5%, and 10% levels, respectively

2) Survey sample=45, Author Survey, 2016

A significant difference was also seen between the views of men (mean= 3.15, St.Dev= 1.68) and the views of women (mean= 3.88, St.Dev= 1.22) when it came to family planning. While it is difficult to obtain the official statistics of domestic violence cases, according to the National Family Health Survey (2006), Meghalaya has the highest level of domestic violence amongst the states in northeast India, with 31% of women being physically mistreated. Based on the results, females felt the issue to be more grievous than the males.

Lastly, there was a significant difference between the views of men (mean= 4.15, St. Dev= 1.04) and the views of women (mean= 4.76, St.Dev= 0.85) on early marriage. The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act in the Indian Constitution states that a girl under the age of 18 and a boy under 21 cannot be married (National Commission for Women, 2007). However, child marriages appear to be on the rise in Meghalaya (The ShillongTimes, 2017). With the Sixth Schedule in place, it seems that society fears laws being set forth by the village headmen instead of the Constitution. Our survey results show that most village headmen were attempting to address child marriages by fining couples who married early in the amount of Rs. 5000.

During the interviews, the headmen were asked to name the one they felt most comfortable approaching between the government and NGOs. All 20 respondents stated that approaching the government was better than approaching NGOs. However, 8 village headmen also maintained contact with NGOs. With the village headman in the position of power in society, the government has come up with the 'One Stop Crisis Centre' to cater to women who are facing violence in their home and community with a helpline number that is accessible 24 hours a day. Although this centre began in 2015, based upon our interviews with women in leadership positions, many women were not aware of the centre or helpline number, although a few of the headmen were. Our results demonstrate that awareness of government programmes has not been successful in the villages. They also show that for any type of assistance, the women of the village had to contact their village headman first.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

The objective of this study was to investigate the roles of the government, NGOs, SHGs, and village leaders in educating women on the repercussions of child marriage, combating domestic violence, and the advantages of family planning. Along with this, the study aimed to shed light on the importance of the village headman, as well as the disconnect between the views of the village headmen and women in leadership positions in the village, on women's issues. It was found that while there were different perceptions of women's issues between the village leaders, government, and NGOs, the three groups were closely aligned in their goals.

The four NGOs mentioned in this paper have emerged as potential developmental agencies that can contribute to the welfare of the people. They have been able to deliver services at the grassroots level.

However, when the village headmen were questioned on who they preferred to approach the government or the NGOs—most of them felt more comfortable approaching the government. Some of the headmen interviewed felt that the NGOs were a nuisance to society.

While the four NGOs conducted some projects independently, they collaborated with government departments for other projects. However, to conduct any programme in the village, the village headman's permission is required, after which information is passed down to the SHG leader. This shows the importance of the village headman in the chain of communications.

In Meghalaya, decisions over the nature of development, access to resources, and ownership have enormous implications for women, and a majority of these decisions are made in institutions in which women have little or no representation. From the *t*-test analysis, there is a clear difference between how women and men perceive women's issues in their society. These results stress the importance of women's representation at the lowest level of governance, which is the village assembly. As deduced by Pogoy, Montalbo, Pañares, and Vasquez (2016), the role of women as contributing to the economy may not be significant to society; however, they should not be underestimated. The exclusion of women in the village administrative body despite their keenness to be a part of it may be due to a psychological factor of it viewing it as the domain of men.

With society being matrilineal in nature, it is important that the women have a say in electing the individual who decides the distribution of land in the society. It is important that Khasi women realise their role in the political decision-making in society as well as recognising their right to elect the leader of their society.

We recommend implementing awareness programmes on the importance of women being a part of the village councils, along with other programmes that are organised by the government and various NGOs. We also recommend the inclusion of both men and women in these programmes to educate and encourage women to come forward to participate.

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