



Women's Land Rights in West Khasi Hills District and Eastern West Khasi Hills District of Meghalaya

An Inquiry
By
North East Network
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Meghalaya is a state in northeastern part of India. It is the only matrilineal society in this part of the country. The state is mainly inhabited by three main tribes, i.e. the Khasis, Jaintias and Garos. Matrilineality in Meghalaya is a social system where lineage is traced through the mother and inheritance is passed down through the females. A 2022 Boston University¹ Report highlights that women own 34% of land in the state, the highest female land ownership rate in India. In the fourth edition of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) India Index for 2023-24, released by NITI Aayog on July 12, 2024². It is stated that Meghalaya is in the "Performer" category ranking 25th where Gender Equality is at 58% with females operating land holdings at 34%.

Despite Khasi women inheriting land and property and transferring lineage to their children, we see that power and control for decision making, still lies in the authority of the male members of the family, clan or community. This dynamic results in patriarchal structures and an imbalance in power relationships between men and women in the community.

This inquiry by North East Network was conducted in two districts amongst 50 women through Focus Group Discussions. All the women belong to the Khasi community. They are from different farming communities located in the villages of Nongshillong and Wahliwlong of Eastern West Khasi Hills District and Laitkseh, Langlew and Umsaw of West Khasi Hills District.

The objective of the inquiry was to understand barriers and challenges related to women's rights over land with regard to their ownership, control and decision-making power.

The Khasi tribe's matrilineal inheritance system grants women inheritance privileges. The youngest daughter known as the "Khadduh" within the Khasi and Jaintia tribe and the "Nokna" amongst the Garo tribes inherits and becomes the custodian of ancestral wealth and property. In the Khasi community there are two categories of land which are the "Ri-Raid" and "Ri-Kynti". "Ri-Raid" is a common community land under the administration of the Raid being managed by the Chief (Syiem) and his Dorbar or Dorbar Raid or village Dorbar and includes all types of land. The Ri-Raid land can be used by the community people or own it with permission from the Chief through 'Skut Jaka' which is a way of dividing and sharing of land amongst the community members of that particular "Ri-Raid". "Ri-Kynti" on the other hand are private lands owned by an individual or clan known as the Kur and then transferred to the custodians.

¹ Boston University, "Summer in the Field: Women's Empowerment and Gender Equity in Meghalaya India", September 14th, 2022

² https://www.niti.gov.in/sites/default/files/2024-07/SDG_India_Index_2023-24.pdf



Management of land within the Khasi community is overseen by the traditional institutions such as village Dorbar³, the Hima⁴ or Raid, and the Kur, all of which are led by men and composed exclusively of male members⁵.

The findings of the inquiry reveals key insights into land ownership, decision-making, and women's participation in community activities across the five villages Nongshillong and Wahlielong of Eastern West Khasi Hills District and Laitkseh, Langlew and Umsaw of West Khasi Hills District. The inquiry also reveals that women inherit land or property which is ancestral in nature and there are also women who own self acquired land which they did not inherit but procured on their own. Even though women are inheritors and custodians of family property, they lack control and decision making power over what she inherits. She only acts as custodian of what can be beneficial to her and her natal family.

- **Land Ownership and Documents:** Most participants own land that was inherited through their ancestry or clan, including agricultural, residential, and forest areas, with some also owning commercial properties. In addition, some participants have self acquired land. The documentation for these lands varies. In some cases, the land is in the mother's name, particularly for those who are the 'Khadduh' or inherit land directly. Ancestral land is usually well-documented, while clan landholders typically have a No Objection Certificate (NOC). In villages like Nongshillong (EWKH), since it is a Ri-Raid Land, legal documents are not available nor necessary to prove land ownership as they sell the land for agricultural purposes to the people within the village based on mutual understanding and trust and decision for selling the land cannot be taken by the woman who is custodian but with the permission of the maternal uncles or parents. Land is transferred and sold from generation to generation and the Sordar (Headman) would provide an NOC.
- **Decision Making and Transfer of Land:** Decisions related to decision making in transfer and selling of land are different in different villages and clans. In most cases, these decisions are made during family meetings, with the final authority resting with the maternal uncle. In case of self acquired land, women are permitted to make the final decision in transferring or selling of that land even if the maternal uncle is absent. However, in case of inherited land or Ri-Kynti Land, the land cannot be sold or transferred without the approval of the clan or Rangbah Kur (Clan Head) or the maternal uncle. In villages such as Nongshillong, Laitkseh, and Langlew, women have the autonomy to make independent decisions regarding land use and transfer, including its sale, without needing external approval with regards to self acquired land. However, this is not applicable in the case of inherited land or Ri-Kynti. When the community plans to construct any kind of new infrastructure like washing ponds, watersheds, footpaths and roads for public use in Ri-Raid Land or Ri-Kynti Land, the Dorbar approaches the respective clan or woman owning the land. The final decision is taken by the Clan Heads or Natal family respectively but no payment is made by the Dorbar Shnong to the custodian and even though the land might still be under the name of the custodian however she cannot refuse usage of her land for community purposes.

³ means the elected or nominated members and office bearers of the DorbarShnong consisting of the Rangbah Shnong (Headman), the Assistant or Deputy RangbahShnong, the Secretary, the treasurer, the Sangot or any other office bearers the DorbarShnong deem necessary;

⁴ territorial areas under the administrative control and jurisdiction of the Chief known as Syiem

⁵ Changing Land Rights in the Khasi Hills of Meghalaya : A Gendered Approach by Kavita N. Soreide

- **Agricultural Decisions and Climate Change Impact:** Women have the autonomy to choose the types of crops they want to grow and sell in the market. However, agricultural yields have been negatively impacted by climate change leading to partial land damage. The current schemes of the government do not sufficiently address these concerns. Climate change has led to decreased farm productivity, and there are no specific measures in place to tackle these effects. The inquiry also reveals that due to logging of timber, start of forest fires, charcoal production, change in rainfall patterns and lack of conservation of forest and water resources contributed to drying up of water resources. Another concern is pest infestations on agricultural crops. As a result, women farmers are approaching relevant government offices for assistance. Although they are generally aware of entitlements for women, they lack specific knowledge about their rights over land. The adverse effects of climate change, including change in rainfall patterns and pest infestations, have pushed farmers or women farmers to use traditional techniques and water-saving measures.
- **Participation and Perception in Community Meetings:** Women are allowed to sit in Dorbar community meetings for distribution schemes and suggest who would benefit from this scheme. However, this also varies with the change in Headman and a new one coming into governance. In case of construction by the community for infrastructure which could benefit the community, the Dorbar approaches the custodian of the land and a decision is taken in a meeting with the clan or her family including the custodians, with final authority resting in the hands of the clan head or maternal uncle. Traditional norms still restrict women from participating in other Dorbar meetings like election of Headman and Annual Meetings of the Executive Committee of the Dorbar Shnong. Annual Meetings are held by the members of the Executive Committee which comprises of male members and this meeting includes reviewing of work done as reported by the Seng Kynthei (Women's Group) and discussion of future plans except for Wahliewlong and only single mothers in Laitkseh. Men view women's involvement in local governance positively but there is a lack of inclusion of women in the decision making process within the Dorbar. In villages like Nongshillong, following if the woman is a single mother the Dorbar counts and marks the attendance of the woman of that household but in absentia. This formality is followed as the men of each and every household are expected to attend the Dorbar.

The women are expected to uphold community harmony and family unity. Therefore, she gives consent in collective meetings to ensure equal land distribution to avoid future problems. Women desire substantive involvement in the decision-making of Dorbars and be accepted as equal rights holders despite traditional exclusions. Women can express their thoughts and opinions in family and clan meetings in relation to transfer, sell and use of land; however traditional norms automatically lead them to seek final decisions from the male members in their family, clan or community. This has led to unequal gender positions between men and women in the community.

Women have traditional knowledge related to conservation of land and water. They know traditional farming techniques, however, this knowledge is often lost and unsustainable due to lack of a platform for knowledge sharing. Additionally, the primary focus in these areas is on maximising financial output through activities like charcoal production and logging of timber occupations which are generally undertaken by men. This has caused environmental damage.



In conclusion, one can say that women's land rights in West Khasi Hills and Eastern West Khasi Hills Districts paint a complex picture, reflecting both enduring traditions and evolving challenges. Despite the inheritance right, women face significant barriers to exercise full power and control. Although they may own and manage land passed down from their mothers, their ability to make key decisions, such as selling or leasing the land, use of land is often restricted and limited by traditional customs and therefore, family consent rule supreme. The situation is compounded by emerging challenges. For example, climate change is impacting agricultural productivity, making effective land management even more critical. The effects of these environmental shifts are adding another layer of challenge for women who are already navigating restrictive traditional norms.

There has been some progress, such as an increase in female participation in community meetings, which represents a step toward inclusion. However, substantial gaps remain. One significant issue is limited access to education, which hampers women's understanding of their rights and their ability to assert them effectively.

It is crucial to include women's voices in any agenda which discusses their rights over land and natural resources. Such education and awareness need to be institutionalised through school curriculum, community meetings and household discussions. It is very important to enhance women's capacities to make decisions over land and realise that women's land rights are important for gender equality in the community. This will reduce gender based discrimination and promote the agency of women.

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