

# Discrimination against Women in a Matrilineal Society: A Reality in the Khasi Tribe of Meghalaya

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## Abstract

The North eastern region of India is diverse in many ways - economically, socially, culturally, and religion wise. In this region, both patrilineal and matrilineal social structures exist side by side. The Khasi tribe of Meghalaya follows the matrilineal system, where lineage and inheritance are traced through women. In such societies, women are expected to play a pivotal role and hold a place of pride in the social setup, unlike their counterparts in a patrilineal society. The main purpose of this study is to unravel the veracity of the belief that women are not discriminated against in the Khasi society. The parameters that have been considered to probe into the existence or non-existence of discrimination against women are: employment, food intake, health, education, allocation of household work, and participation in decision making. The study reveals that discrimination against women is an unfortunate reality among the Khasi community of Meghalaya. The Composite Gender Index that was constructed indicates that the intensity of discrimination was greater in health and decision making as compared to the other parameters considered in the study.

**Keywords:** matrilineal, Khasi society, health, inheritance, decision making

**JEL Classification:** J16, J71, I14, I24

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Gender discrimination is a phenomenon prevalent in most parts of the world, especially in the developing economies. It emanates not only from pre-existing differences in economic endowments between men and women, but also from pre-existing religious, cultural, and social norms and perceptions. The nature and extent of discrimination, however, vary considerably across countries and regions. Numerous studies and reports have shown that women in India have been subject to gender discrimination since time immemorial. This can be traced to the rules laid down by Manu in 200 B.C where he said, "by a young girl, by a young women, or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently even in her own house. In childhood, a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, and when her husband expires, she is subject to her sons." In short, women are denigrated to lead a subservient life (Wadley, 1988).

Discrimination is evident in all strata of the society. Neglect of women has had serious ramifications down generations. Unequal opportunities in education have always kept women unaware or less aware of her surroundings and contemporary events. Quality diet deprivation of women when compared to men has resulted in progenies with lesser abilities. Women have always been thought to be politically incapable and are often denied a rightful place in the political map of the country. In the religious domain, women are also not allowed to take part and practice it at par with men. All these discriminations have resulted in various social and economic problems. Although gender discrimination remains pervasive in many dimensions of life throughout the country, women of tribal societies enjoy greater freedom and play important socioeconomic roles in their family and society at large. According to Verrier (1976):

The tribal woman is indeed in many ways the equal, if not the rival, of the tribal man... they (Tribal women) have an important role in festivity and funeral; they can more than hold their own with their men; they are free and self-reliant, respected and loved by their men folk, and adored by their children.

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Their life is full, interesting and satisfied. But in recent times, the belittling of women's contribution and reorientation of gender and sex have brought about radical changes in the status of tribal women and their empowerment, resulting in deprivation, exploitation, and imposition of restrictions on their daily life.

They have been found to have limited access to educational and employment resources relative to men (Dunn, 1993). Tribal girls face discrimination in intake of nutritious food, education, and proper health care. They do not have the same inheritance rights, except in matrilineal societies (Dashora, 1995). In few communities, a definite decline in the status of women has been observed, threatening their very existence. This decline may not be due to the low level of fertility, but rather due to the high level of mortality, illiteracy, and illogical health practices.

The tribal women of North-East India, however, enjoy a better position in the society than their counterparts in the rest of the country in the absence of social evils like dowry, *sati*, and female foeticides. The relatively high status of women of the region is reflected in the literacy rate and schooling among tribal women (Mitra and Singh, 2008). Nevertheless, we find that even in this part of the country, women confront various social and economic problems such as poverty, illiteracy, poor health, landlessness, discrimination in inheritance, wage discrimination, alienation in decision-making and politics, etc. Women and children bear the brunt of the unrest and violence that have afflicted this region in recent times. In the light of the above, it can be said that the problems of women of this region are not different from the rest of the country.

## **Status of Women in the Research Area**

In few societies are women as fortunate as women in matrilineal societies such as those found in Kerala and Meghalaya. The matrilineal societies, where lineage and inheritance are traced through women, are free from many social restraints of the larger Indian society. Such societies undoubtedly allow a higher place for women than in most societies. In the traditional societies of Meghalaya, men were warriors and protectors, tillers of the soil and hunters, administrators, and priests. This explains that they used to play their roles in domains outside the house. Women played the roles of mothers, housekeepers, custodians of the family property, helpers in the fields, weavers, and betel nut growers. However, in the last century, the matrilineal system has eroded substantially, frequently under direct or indirect pressure from state policies (Agarwal, 1990).

Among the Khasis in Meghalaya, women enjoy a respectable position and have special privileges and responsibilities in the home. The family organization centers around her. She is not only the keeper of the hearth and home, but also has authority over the family property, including jewels, vessels, implements, land, etc. Her brother, however, acts as the *knii* in the family - meaning a councilor for her and her children. The house where she lives goes to her youngest daughter. This is one of the basic characteristics of matrilineal systems for which the Khasis are well-known in anthropological literature. Besides, the woman exhibits total control over the family business. She can keep not only the finances under her control, but can also execute all the roles required to conduct the business in the market place. The Khasi woman can play multiple roles by not necessarily hampering the role of the wife, mother, and daughter.

Her rights over house and property are sanctioned by customs and religious traditions, and these kinship obligations of the woman places extra responsibility on her. It is the customary norm that *Ka Khadduh* or the youngest daughter acts as the custodian of ancestral property, as the caretaker of aged parents, and of any unmarried brothers and sisters. However, the maternal uncle indirectly controls the ancestral property as all important decisions regarding property are taken by him. Her ability to inherit property and have adequate economic and social freedom amounts to shouldering of social and kinship responsibilities, but not exactly empowerment. If we are to go by the meaning of the term empowerment, it adds to the status that women inherit responsibilities and freedom without access to power, which can be equated with choices and decision making. Power in public decision-making bodies rests with men, and women are generally excluded from such bodies. It is the men who have access to and control of the lawmaking body and local decision making councils in the State. Women do not have any reservations in the autonomous District Councils unlike the Panchayats in other parts of the country. This sort of discrimination against women has paved the way for men to gain control of these bodies and thereby, to have the authority to make political, social, and legal rules for the society. This hinders women's participation in the development process.

The root cause of this sorry state of affairs can be traced back to the formation of the State of Meghalaya. The State

was formed according to the guidelines of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India, but the Constitutional Amendments number 73 and 74 are not applicable in Meghalaya. These two amendments ensure reservation of one third of the seats for women in Gram Panchayats and urban local bodies. In the absence of such bodies in Meghalaya, the womenfolk have no meaningful representation in the decision-making bodies at the grass root level. This is indeed a paradox in a state where people follow the matrilineal system, women inherit the ancestral property and enjoy a significant position in the social system.

## Objectives of the Study

The Khasi tribe follows the matrilineal system, whereby it is deemed that woman should play a pivotal role in the society. To an onlooker, it apparently appears that a Khasi woman holds a place of pride in her social setup. However, with the passage of time, interaction of the Khasis with people of other communities has increased, resulting in a change in the way of life. Increased mobility to the other parts of the country for higher education or employment and inter community marriages have led to the exchange and adoption of culture of societies which are patriarchal in nature. Transformation in the society can be observed from instances where the surname of the father is also included in the name of the child which has hitherto been only that of the mother. Although a matrilineal society, near absence of women representatives in decision making bodies and increase in domestic violence and abuse is indeed paradoxical.

The main purpose of this study is to unravel the veracity of the belief that women are not discriminated against in a matrilineal society. This study will give an insight into the actual position of women in a matrilineal society. This will help in forming various plans of action wherever necessary. It will also help in creating social awareness. Society can take a re-look and gear itself in adapting to changing times. Women themselves can come forward to establish their rights and respectability. A beginning in the right direction will usher in a new growth story for the Khasi women and with it, a cascading effect shall filter down to the generation that is to come.

In particular, the objectives of the present study are given as hereunder :

- (i) To investigate whether gender discrimination against women in any form exists in the Khasi Community. In other words, to probe whether gender discrimination in the Khasi society is a myth or a reality.
- (ii) If gender discrimination is found, then the study aimed to examine in which particular domain it exists.

## Methodology

The Khasi tribe accounts for 47.05% of the total population of Meghalaya (as per 2001 census). A randomly selected sample comprising of 681 respondents from the three districts of Meghalaya, viz., East Khasi Hills, West Khasi Hills, and Ri-Bhoi, that are predominantly inhabited by Khasis was considered to probe into whether gender discrimination against women really exists. Since women in a matrilineal society occupy respectable position, it was felt that if the study is conducted from the female perspective, it would reveal a true picture of the problem at hand.

Primary data for this study, was, therefore, collected by using a structured questionnaire from the female members of the Khasi society who accounted for 49.27 % of the total Khasi population. Both closed and open ended questions were used to acquire relevant information pertaining to the extent of gender discrimination against women of the Khasi society. The close-ended type questions were used because they are easy to respond, take little time, and are easy to tabulate and analyze. To get a deeper insight into the study at hand, open-ended questions were also incorporated in the questionnaire. Data for the study was collected over a period of five months from December 2010 to April 2011. The parameters adopted to elicit sufficient information in this regard are employment, food intake, health, education, allocation of household work, participation in decision making, and abuse and violence against women. The data so generated have been tabulated and analyzed by using various relevant statistical and social science techniques. Although there are numerous methods for constructing composite indices, the principal component analysis is perhaps the most popular and often used method. We have used the method in our study to form a composite index that would help in identifying the parameters which best explain gender discrimination, if prevalent. Relevant information was also retrieved from sources like published documents, articles in professional journals and newspapers, government documents, etc.

❖ **Limitations of the Study :** Although the present study is on the Khasi Community, the study was conducted only in the three districts of Meghalaya, namely, East Khasi Hills, West Khasi Hills, and Ri Bhoi, which are predominantly inhabited by the Khasis. To elicit the actual status of the Khasi women in society from a female perspective, data was collected only from females above 18 years of age. The study had to be based on a small sample survey due to resource constraints. However, despite the limitations, it is felt that the findings of the study would provide the foundation from which inferences could be drawn and a general conclusion pertaining to the study at hand could be arrived at.

## Analysis and Discussion

The demographic profile of the sample population is composed of Khasi women above 18 years of age, who were the followers of Christianity, Islam, and Seng Khasi religion ; illiterates and literates with varying levels of educational attainment ranging from primary school level to post graduation and above; and unemployed women and those employed in agricultural, manufacturing, and service sectors earning an annual income of less than ₹ 50,000 to above ₹ 500,000. The respondents of the sample population belonged to both small and large household sizes. Though limited in coverage, the following parameters were considered to study the presence or absence of gender discrimination against women in the Khasi society :

❖ **Employment :** Employment is a significant indicator in analyzing the status of women in a society. To elicit the employment status of Khasi women, nineteen variables have been used to describe the parameter employment. They are: sector of employment, nature, purpose, consent of family, years of service, job satisfaction, working hours, parity in emoluments received for similar work, favoritism towards males in place of work, opportunities for career advancement, preferential treatment of working women in family, type of crop produced, purpose of production, ownership of land under cultivation, ownership of sales proceeds, ownership of business, ownership of funds required for business, source of loan taken, and accessibility to loan.

It was heartening to learn that in our sample study, a majority (75.77%) of the respondents were employed. While 35.10% of the employed were engaged in private organizations of the service sector, 16.89 % of the respondents worked in government services. 22.47 % were engaged in agriculture, and only 1.32 % were employed in the industrial sector. Majority of the women, i.e. 64.61 % were engaged in full time employment, either supplementing their family income or acting as sole bread earners of the family. The respondents stated that most of them did not face any restrictions from the family members in being gainfully employed. Though a majority of the employed women of the sample population were engaged in employment for more than five years, only 54.19% expressed job satisfaction. This is indicative of the fact that women either do not get a job of their preference or face discrimination in the workplace. The study has revealed that 21.15 % of the respondents working in the private sector felt that gender discrimination against women does exist so far as emoluments, opportunities, and career advancement are concerned.

Employed women enjoy a higher status at home and in the society than their unemployed counterparts. About one-fourth of the respondents were employed in the agrarian sector. 22.76 % of the women working in the agricultural sector produced food crops on their own land. While cultivation is mainly done for domestic consumption, majority of the women do have access to the revenue generated from sales proceeds. Many respondents were also engaged in entrepreneurial activities, which are either self financed or through loans taken from the non-institutional money market. Some women have also reported facing problems in acquiring loans from banks or other financial institutions on grounds of gender discrimination. Thus, data pertaining to employment does indicate some amount of existence of gender discrimination against women.

❖ **Food Intake:** The quality and efficiency of the labour force of an economy also depend on the availability of a balanced diet. Moreover, it is an indication of not only the socioeconomic background of a society, but also of the prevalence of gender discrimination. Variables such as discrimination in the number of meals taken, in the quantity consumed, and preference in distribution of food have been used to describe the food intake parameter. The study throws a positive light on the fact that there was no gender bias in case of food intake, unlike many parts of northern India. Khasis are basically non-vegetarian people. 98.09% of the respondents reported that men and women are free to take any amount of food, whenever they desire. A very small section (5.43 %) of the respondents said that they served food first to the male members of the family. This may be for convenience sake or for other reasons. Hence, it cannot be a significant indicator of gender discrimination.



❖ **Health:** Health is a very good indicator of the level of women development. The health parameter was measured by using seven variables, viz., regular health checkups by both males and females, discrimination in medical attention, medical attention sought in case of illness, place of child birth, procedure of child birth, providing additional nutrition to lactating mothers, and post delivery rest. The responses received from the womenfolk of the study area shows that people in general were not very health conscious, as they visited a doctor only when they were sick. As far as general medical attention is concerned, there was no gender bias. However, maternal health care appears to be an area of concern. The study revealed that delivery and post delivery was taken in a very casual way, with 44.93 % of the total sample population having child birth at home with the help of midwives or untrained relatives. It was also observed that a huge majority of pregnant Khasi women (46.4 %) did not receive antenatal check - ups.

❖ **Education:** Education is one of the most fundamental parameters of development. It can play a crucial role in empowerment of women and improving the status of women in society. Variables such as discrimination in school type, preference given to males for higher studies, discrimination in encouragement to study, and in availability of study time have been used to describe the education parameter. This parameter does not reveal much gender discrimination because children, irrespective of whether they are boys or girls, were encouraged to attend school. Although a large majority (77.53 %) of the respondents said that girls are given time to pursue studies, 22.47 % of them could not do so because they had to attend to household chores. Moreover, some traces of gender discrimination in education were observed, with 29.81 % of the parents giving preference to boys with regards to higher studies.

❖ **Allotment of Household Chores:** Since Khasi society is a matrilineal society, an instant thought which may come to one's mind is that the household chores must be performed by their male counterparts. The parameter pertaining to household work has been explained by five variables: gender bias in cooking, in washing clothes, in washing utensils, in cleaning and sweeping, and in care of the young. It was found that in 55 - 61% of the cases, household chores like washing, cleaning, sweeping, etc. are entirely a woman's domain. With regards to care of siblings, only 69.75% of the respondents reported that the older children are made to take care of their younger siblings, irrespective of their gender. This practice inculcates a sense of responsibility among the elders towards their younger brothers and sisters.

❖ **Participation in Decision Making :** The Khasi society portrays a very paradoxical picture. While on the one hand, it follows the matrilineal system with descent and inheritance traced through the female line, yet on the other hand, females do not have much involvement and representation in the decision-making process either at home or at the societal level. Women representation in the Parliament, State Legislature, and the District Council is negligible. It is surprising that women play an active role in the socioeconomic field, yet very few come forward to contest in the elections.

Six variables were used to construct the parameter pertaining to women's role in decision making. They are: opinion of female members in family matters, acceptance of female opinion, gender bias regarding membership in the village council known as 'Dorbar', office held by a female family member in Dorbar or any local body, gender bias towards women as pastors, deacons, or church elders, and opinion of females on becoming a pastor, deacon, or a church elder.

The study reveals that though the women decided the family budget; the decision regarding the daily menu was a male's prerogative. However, for more serious decisions like children's education and medical care, both the parents took a joint decision. In addition, irrespective of these aspects, most of the decisions were male dominated. Though the opinion of the females were sought in crucial family decisions, yet, they are not always accepted. The study revealed that subjugation of Khasi women is very much prevalent in the societal decision making process. 91.19 % of the respondents reported that females were prevented from holding offices in the village council, known as the 'Dorbar'. In the Natural Resource Management Group meetings, women could air their problems regarding water supply, sanitation and the like, but they did not participate in decision making.

The Church is also a place where important decisions pertaining to the society are made. Here too, gender bias could be observed. 65.49 % of the respondents reported that females are not allowed to be pastors, deacons, or members of Church committees. Such positions are exclusively reserved for the males. Hence, females of the Khasi society have now begun to feel discriminated against. While 35.10% of the females strongly felt that they should be allowed to assume the roles of pastors or church elders, 60.35 % agreed that they should not be deprived of such positions.

❖ **Domestic Violence and Abuse:** Violence against women, especially in the home front, is a burning topic in today's world. Although Khasi women enjoy much more respect and status as compared to women in other parts of the country, yet they are indeed victims of domestic violence. There is a gradual increase in the number of cases of sexual abuse and rape in the Khasi society. Desertion is also a common phenomenon in the State, especially in the cases of unregistered marriages. However, probably due to embarrassment or it being a social taboo, sufficient information in this regard could not be elicited from the respondents.

## Construction of a Composite Index

The complexity of data on the various components obtained to gauge the existence or non existence of gender discrimination in Khasi society cannot be given a comprehensive picture unless an index that obtains a single composite measure from the six measures is constructed. Principal component analysis was used to form indices pertaining to employment ( $X_1$ ), food intake ( $X_2$ ), health ( $X_3$ ), education ( $X_4$ ), household work ( $X_5$ ), and participation in the decision making process ( $X_6$ ). It may be noted here that since only 2.94% of the respondents reported of domestic violence and only 0.15% reported sexual abuse of women within the family, it may be inferred that Khasi women, in general, occupy a respectable position in their families. They are not subjected to physical torture and ill treatment unlike their counterparts in other parts of the country. It is for this reason that the variables pertaining to domestic violence and sexual abuse were dropped while constructing the composite index of gender discrimination.

Since the first factor extracted by the principal component analysis accounts for maximum variance, the factor scores of the first factor obtained for each of the six indices mentioned above have been used to form a composite index of Gender Discrimination. The results of the principal component analysis are indicated in the Tables 1 and 2.

The Table 1 indicates that 26.15% of the variance in the data has been explained by the first component extracted and 18.62 % for the second. Hence, for the purpose of interpretation, we shall consider only the first factor loadings given in the Table 2. The Table 2 shows the correlations (also called as factor loadings) between the variables and the

Table 1: Eigen Values				
Eigenvalues (final.sta)				
Extraction:	Principal components			
	Eigen values	% of total variance	Cummulative eigen value	Cummulative %
1	1.568958	26.1493	1.568958	26.1493
2	1.117247	18.62078	2.686204	44.77007
Extraction Method: Principle Component Analysis. Source: Primary Data				

Table 2: Factor Loadings		
Statistical Factors	Factor Loadings (Unrotated)	
Analysis	Extraction of Principal Components	
Variables	Factor1	Factor2
$X_1$	0.59447	-0.303406
$X_2$	-0.278003	-0.593546
$X_3$	0.753117	-0.185267
$X_4$	0.039872	-0.740968
$X_5$	0.193597	0.229570
$X_6$	0.729396	0.191921
Explained Variance	1.568958	1.117247
Prp. Totl	0.261493	0.186208
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Source: Primary Data		

two factors. The first factor is more highly correlated with the variables than the second factor. This was expected because the factors were extracted successively and account for less and less overall variance.

The factor loadings extracted reveals that although the Khasi society is a matrilineal society, traces of gender discrimination against women were prevalent. It may be inferred that gender discrimination against women of the Khasi community is best described by discrimination in health, with the highest factor loading of 0.753117, followed successively by participation in decision making with factor loading of 0.729396, employment with a loading of 0.59447, household work with a factor loading of 0.193597, and education with the lowest positive loading of 0.039872. The negative factor loading of - 0.278003 indicates that there was no discrimination against women in case of food intake. Thus, our analysis has revealed that although the Khasi community is a matriarchal community, some traces of gender discrimination against women did exist in reality. To probe into whether gender discrimination has any relationship with the size of the household, the correlation coefficient between the factor scores of the first factor of the composite gender index and the size of the household was constructed. The correlation coefficient of 0.038155 indicates that gender discrimination has no relationship with the size of the household in Khasi society.

## Policy Implications

No society or nation can develop if justice is not meted out to half of its population comprising of women. The yardstick of development cannot just be an increase in national income and per capita income. Concerted efforts and implementation of policy decisions to improve the HDI ranking is imperative. Policy makers do recognize the importance of women's education and health in the overall development framework of the country. Hence, elimination of gender inequality has become an integral part of any policy document today. Increase in women work participation, however, requires the creation of facilities, opportunities, awareness and attitudinal change, which cannot be fully achieved through market mechanisms. State intervention is required to promote access to education, health, and work.

Meghalaya with an HDI value of 0.585 ranks 26 among 32 States and Union Territories (Meghalaya Human Development Report, 2008). Poor health and educational attainments, especially among women, are the major reasons for low level of human development in the State. The study has revealed that women are discriminated against as far as the health indicator is concerned. Lack of awareness, lack of a nutritious diet, and general apathy towards maternal health has resulted in an increase in anaemia among pregnant women. 72% of the women in the state suffer from anaemia (NFHS-3). So, it is felt that if the state has to improve its HDI ranking, gender discrimination, especially on health grounds, needs to be eliminated. The recently launched Medical Health Insurance Scheme by the government can be seen as a positive step in this direction.

Though the tribal women of Meghalaya have greater mobility and access to resources, they have less social space as far as decision making is concerned. While women in the rest of the country have 33 % reservation in the Panchayats, there is negligible representation of women of Meghalaya even in the local and middle level political institutions such as the 'Dorbar' and the district councils. Women need to come forward to seek their political rights in governance and decision making. There should be greater political will to encourage and support women participation in decision-making bodies. Marrying of girls before the attainment of the legal age of 18 years, especially in poor families, often deprive women of the basic rights and subject them to domestic violence, sexual abuse, desertion, and social isolation. The customary practices of the matrilineal society prevent women from seeking maintenance if deserted by their husbands. Enforcement of compulsory registration of marriages and creating awareness about the rights of women in the existing legal framework will ensure greater security to women.

## Conclusion

Gender polarization creates an artificial gap between men and women, thereby creating gender roles, which have consequently given rise to gender discrimination. Such gender bias is in gross violation of human rights, which is inimical to a progressive society. In matrilineal societies, however, women enjoy a better position in society than their counterparts in patrilineal societies of India. They play a pivotal role and have distinctively greater responsibility than other women of other societies. But with the passage of time, the matrilineal system has eroded to a considerable extent. It is indeed paradoxical that although in matrilineal Khasi society, women inherit the ancestral property and enjoy a significant position in the social system, they have very little say in decision making bodies of the society.

Hence, it can be concluded that traces of discrimination against women have been observed in the Khasi society of Meghalaya.

The composite gender index constructed to elicit the area in which gender discrimination exists, reveals that gender discrimination against women in the Khasi society is best described by discrimination in health followed successively by participation in decision making, employment, household work, and education. Although it is a small sample study, yet it is indicative of the existence of gender discrimination against women in the Khasi society. It will, therefore, not be a fallacy to conclude that gender discrimination is not a myth but an unfortunate reality among the Khasi community of Meghalaya, the intensity of which is, however, lower than what it is in many parts of the country.

## Scope for Future Research

Future research may consider studying the impact of modernization and advancement on the status of tribal women. Research can be conducted on workplace discrimination and also to examine how increase in women empowerment can reduce gender discrimination. While violence against women persists in all societies, its form and acceptable threshold vary from one society to another. Gender based violence and stress can also be considered as important indicators in future studies on gender discrimination.

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