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STATUS OF WOMEN IN THE RURAL KHASI SOCIETY OF MEGHALAYA

(Presented in the National Level Seminar on Gender Issues and Empowerment of Women on the occasion of Platinum Jubilee of Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata held during 1-2 February 2007)

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Introduction:

The issue of empowerment of women has been much discussed at various levels to find out the solution to age-old problem of gender discrimination, exploitation of women and for the upliftment of their status and position in the society. In terms of income women are poorer than men because more households headed by women fall below the income poverty line than households headed by men (HDR, 1997). Surveys of household consumption expenditure in many countries of North-South America, Europe and former CIS show the incidence of income poverty to be high among the female-headed households. In some countries like Indonesia, Morocco, Viet Nam, Zimbabwe however there is no difference between male and female-headed households in this regard.

Gender disparities exist everywhere in the world. Women are underrepresented in local and national decision making bodies. They earn less than men (as mentioned above) and participate comparatively less in wage employment and also remain mostly in low-grade jobs. In the poor areas even schooling of girl child is very poor and drop out rate is very high compared to men though one of the UN Millennium Development Goals is universalisation of primary education by 2015 (HDR, 2003). The target during 1990 to 2000 was achieved in this regard to reduce gender disparity in enrolment at primary level but looking at the gap in drop-out, income, work participation, social and political participation one can assert that there is a long way to go for the removal of gender inequality in education, economy and social status.

However, in most of the tribal societies even if poor, women always have an instilled special position and role they play in different spheres with great responsibility vis a vis their counterpart men. The Khasi society of Meghalaya is such a society, commonly known as matrilineal where authority, title, inheritance, residence after marriage and succession are traced through the female line. So it is presumed that they do not require any special effort to make them aware and get social, economic, political or psychological understanding and knowledge to establish their rights along with men in their society as they are automatically placed on an esteemed level. They are presumed to have free access to education, ownership of property, authority in their family and society; they are supposed to be the heads of their families and have the power to take decision what to be done or not etc. But a recent survey by us in the rural areas of Meghalaya shows that the number of families headed by the male is more than the families headed by the female (1.6:1). Also many of the families headed by females

are due to compulsion as they are either widow, separated or deserted with small children.

Also in the political sphere, hardly anybody is there who is female and even in the Dorbar (similar to that of village panchayat of plain areas) females are not allowed to take part in the meeting or decision-making. But in most of the socio-economic activities, still now dominance on female is observed even though they are assumed to be physically weak. Also, even though some families are headed by males it may be that they are just to carry out activities with the guidance of their female counterpart who has better control over assets and therefore no fear of loosing anything even if they are deserted by their husbands. Therefore, a question may arise whether in Khasi tribe the status of women is ascribed or prescribed by the society. Also it is pertinent to enquire about the direction to which the position and status of women are moving with the development of the society.

This paper is thus an attempt to examine the *dynamics of status and role of tribal women in Meghalaya, especially of Khasi women in the rural areas*. It is examined through a number of social, economic, political, cultural, psychological and attitudinal indicators on the basis of the primary data on such factors collected from two villages in East Khasi Hills District of Meghalaya.

Methodology of the Study and Data:

Process of empowerment of women here has been studied through primary survey in two villages from East Khasi Hills District of Meghalaya. These villages are Ringkseh and Kyn-ton-u-mon under Mawlyngknang block. The villages are chosen purposively on consideration of conveniences, such as access and communication, security, expenditure involved in survey etc. However most of the features of the rural Meghalaya have much in common in the aforesaid selected villages.

There are 257 households (119+138) in all in those selected villages. The ratio of male and female-headed families in the selected villages was found to be 1.6: 1 in Meghalaya. Though the society of Meghalaya is commonly known as matrilineal, more than two third of the families run by males and only around 1/3rd are headed by females. Then question naturally arises whether the society of Meghalaya is gradually approaching towards patrilineal or the dominance of female still has been prevailing in the same manner and the change has been just for the convenience without any major change in balance of gender distribution in any respect.

Then, we have stratified the families according to the characteristics of sex of family head, caste, occupation, education etc. and finally chosen 95 households; 37 out of 175 male-headed households and 58 from 82 female-headed households. Data have been collected, from the finally chosen households, on different aspects like family size, sex, education, caste, occupation, income and expenditure, mode of expenditure and also on their attitude/opinion towards social, political, cultural aspects i.e. on social, cultural, economical, political, religious and psychological aspects of the heads as well as other members of the families. From that information we tried to understand the process of empowerment by analysing the data. The study is mainly descriptive and exploratory.

Observations and Discussion:

Basic Characteristics of Sample Households:

From the table-1 we observe that out of 37 male headed households about 68 per cent of the heads are in the below 50 age group and over 43 percent are in the below 40 age group. Where as among the female headed households about 36 per cent of the heads are in the below 50 and around 20 per cent are in the age group of 20 to 40. On the other hand, around 22 per cent of male heads are in the above 50 age group and about 64 per cent of the female heads are in the similar age group.

Table-1: Age-wise Sex Composition of the Sample Households

Sex of Head	20-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	61-70	>70	Total
Male	4 (10.8)	12 (32.4)	9 (24.3)	6 (16.2)	4 (10.8)	2 (5.4)	37
Female	3 (5.2)	9 (15.5)	9 (15.5)	14 (24.1)	17 (29.3)	6 (10.3)	58
Total	7 (7.37)	21 (22.11)	18 (18.95)	20 (21.05)	21 (22.11)	8 (8.42)	95

Source: Field Survey

Note: Figures in the parentheses represent percentage to total of the respective sex

The implication is two-fold: (i) Due to tradition, earlier, females were dominating in the management and decision making of the families and hence the power (economic and social) was concentrated in their hands. However over the years due to social change and external influence, educational expansion and increasing involvement of the male section gradual shift of power has been taking place in recent years. Or it is also a fact that some of the present day female heads hesitate to mention that they are the heads of their family. After disintegration or emergence of nuclear families the tendency of male of being head of the family has been increasing.

(ii) Many of the females are divorced, deserted or mutually separated and thus became automatically head of their family. It does not necessarily imply their supreme position and status in the society though they are the earners and decision makers of their families. Though it is normal that after the death of husband in her old age the woman remains under the care of her grown up and working children, especially in the non-tribal societies, in Meghalaya many a times divorce or separation takes place at the stage when their children remain in their growing age and hence mothers compulsorily become the custodian and decision maker in their families.

Table-2: Distribution of Families by Family Size across different Educational Categories of the Head of the Household

Sex of Head	Education	1-5	6-10	> 10	Total
Male Headed	Illiterate	1	6	0	7 (18.9)
	< M.P.	9	7	2	18 (48.7)
	> M. P.	7	5	0	12 (32.4)
	Sub-Total	17	18	2	37 (100)
Female Headed	Illiterate	12	6	0	18 (31.0)
	< M.P.	18	12	1	31 (53.5)
	> M. P.	5	4	0	9 (15.5)
	Sub-Total	35	22	1	58 (100)
Grand Total		57	40	2	95

Source: Field Survey

Table-2 reveals that percentage of families having size 1-5 in case of male-headed households is the same as that in case of family size more than 5 persons. In case of female-headed households however percentage of families having size of less than 6 is much higher (about 60 per cent) than the percentage of families having size 6 and above (around 40 per cent). Almost at every educational level especially in the illiterate category, female heads are having a tendency to keep family size lower than the male heads. With the improvement of education, male heads become aware and try to control their family size but in case of female heads it makes hardly any difference whether she is educated or not as they are more aware and sensitive to the social changes and face the problems. Of course family size in case of some female heads is because of the separation, divorce or becoming widow at the early age and not marrying again.

Table-3: Distribution of Households According to Marital Status of the Head

Sex of Head	Unmarried	Widow	Divorced/ Separated	Married once	Married more than once	Total
Male	3 (8.1)	2 (5.4)	0 (00)	27 (73.0)	5 (13.5)	37
Female	1 (1.7)	18 (31.3)	7+4 (19.0)	26 (44.8)	2 (3.4)	58

Source: Field Survey

Note: Figures in the parentheses represent percentage to total of the respective sex

From table-3 it is observed that about 50 per cent of the female heads are due to automatic choice as they are either widows, divorced or separated and hence there is no chance of male to be head. Around 48 per cent of female heads are married and barely 2 per cent are unmarried. But in case of male heads, around 86 per cent are married (once or twice) and about 8 per cent are unmarried. It indicates that in the unmarried category of head, percentage of male is relatively more the percentage of female. Also percentage of male remarried after the death or divorced of their wives is more than the percentage of female heads remarried after husband's death or divorce. Here three interesting points may be noted:

- (i) At least 50 per cent of the female heads are married and that indicates that a substantial portion of females become head after their marriage, which is very uncommon in case of any plain land non-tribal society. Due to traditional Khasi customs, males normally live with their wives in the in-laws (wives' parental house).
- (ii) Due to the dominance of Khasi women in the social and economic fields, they are more independent and can sustain even after separation from their husband. But hardly any man is there who remain alone after divorce or separation from his wife. Only a few cases are observed where after the death of wife in the very old age they are forced to live with their children.
- (iii) Another point to be noted here is that the percentage of literate head is more in case of female than that of male but in the category of higher education percentage of female head is relatively less than that of male. It indicates though rural female also has better access to elementary education in case of higher education their access declines. Also the level of education has insignificant effect on the size of the family.

Economic Status:

Status can be earned due to the control over economic access and power. Thus here first of all, status is examined through the distribution of economic power i.e., whether the female household head is an earner or dependent, their holding of tangible and intangible assets, nature of inheritance of ancestral property and the nature of job opportunities in which women are involved as against their men counterpart. Also their status in the society can be known through the social position exhibited through the pattern of involvement in social functions and duties (organizer of functions, director,

participants or just spectator etc), which provides dimension of respect earned from the general public. Also the position in the family is exhibited through their pattern (timing, quantity, quality etc) of nutritional intake that will be considered later. Of course in many Khasi families even if the men are breadwinner their wives become customary head. Table-4 described the percentage distribution of household according the earning and dependence of male and female heads across different age group as observed from the survey data.

From the table we observe that about 16 per cent of the all-family heads are dependent and over 84 per cent are earner. In case of male heads about 92 per cent are earners and in case of female heads this percentage is about 79. Though the aged people (whether male or female) who are either retired or non-earner is found to be head in other societies, in Khasi society with the emergence of nuclear family earning became one of the principal criteria to be head of the family for both male and female. It indicates that now-a-days the male counterpart who contributes significantly to the family income gain command over their female counterpart. Though females are prevalent in most of the socio-economic activities in Meghalaya over 20 per cent of the female heads are dependent and thus the criteria of earning is not essential for a female to be the head. Also, even if they do not earn and depend on the income of either husband or young children they can act as head and thus decision maker. Moreover, the deserted/divorced/widows also whether earner or not are the heads due to the condition of the family. In some cases of course, due to the death of wife or due to hesitation and influence of modern society some people announce the name of their senior most male member as the head of the family. However, the chance of becoming head of a non-earner female member is relatively more than a non-earning male member even in a joint family of the rural Khasi society.

Table-4: Distribution of Household by Earning Status of the Head of Families of Different Age Group

	Age	Dependent	Earner
Male	20-40	1 (6.2)	15 (93.8)
	41-60	1 (66.7)	14 (93.3)
	> 60	1 (16.7)	5 (83.3)
	Sub-Total	3 (8.1)	34 (91.9)
Female	20-40	4 (33.3)	8 (66.7)
	41-60	2 (8.7)	21 (91.3)
	> 60	6 (26.0)	17 (74.0)
	Sub-Total	12 (20.7)	46 (79.3)
	Grand Total	15 (15.79)	80 (84.21)

Source: Field Survey

Note: Figures in the parentheses represent percentage to total of the respective sex

If we look at the case of inheritance of property the traditional custom is to inherit ancestral assets primarily to the females especially the youngest daughter of the family. However the other daughters of the family also get the share of the ancestral property informally but not equal with that of youngest one and the settlement is done with the consent of the daughters' maternal uncle. The data reveals that about relatively very less male heads (about 35 per cent) have received share of ancestral property while about 65 per cent does not inherit any property. Those male inherited property either due to the fact that there was no daughter of his parents or his parents through will inherited some property. But in case of youngest daughter the inheritance is compulsory. The data shows that 50 per cent of the female heads inherited property from their parents and the remaining 50 per cent did not as they were either not youngest daughter or their parents have nothing to inherit. However the overall fact is that though some of the males inherit parental property, the females had more privilege to inherit property.

Table-5: Distribution of Heads According to the Inheritance of Ancestral Property

Sex	Property Inherited	Not Inherited
Male Head	13 (35.14)	24 (64.86)
Female Head	29 (50.00)	29 (50.00)

Source: Field survey

Note: Figures in the parentheses represents percentage to total.

Table-6: Per Capita Monthly Income, Expenditure and their Variation across Male and Female Headed Households in the Sample Area

Sex of Head	Weighted Average Value (Rs.)		Coefficient of Variation	
	Male Headed	Female Headed	Male Headed	Female Headed
Monthly Income	2208.82	1845.43	65.98	88.99
Consumption Expenditure	958.27	831.69	47.29	50.00
Food Expenditure	570.05	495.68	36.06	38.84
Education Expenditure	98.61	58.17	164.23	254.85
Healthcare Expenditure	43.58	60.07	124.58	87.41
Electricity Expenditure	23.33	25.56	124.54	103.85
Travel Expenditure	156.42	150.18	82.15	90.02
Other Expenditure	66.28	42.32	186.01	177.03

Source: Field survey

Note: Figures in the parentheses represents percentage to total.

The table-6 shows that monthly average per capita family income in case of female-headed household is much lower than that of male-headed household. Also average per capita expenditure on food, education, travel and other purposes (entertainment, drink, dress etc) are comparatively higher in case of male-headed

household than that of female-headed household. Only in case of health care and electricity female-headed household spends more than a male-headed household. But the coefficient of variation in income and expenditures across families are much higher in case female headed household than that of male-headed household. This is because many of female heads are either widow, deserted or separated with small children and hence has very poor income to spend. This indicates the disadvantageous condition of the rural females in spite of being known as matrilineal society.

In spite of all these one thing is clear that the management of families are better in case of female head than that of a male as they have a tendency of saving more and giving more emphasis on human development through education health care etc, which is clear from the table-7. The table represents the result of regression of the linear equation $Y = a + bX$. Where Y is either saving or educational expenditure or medical expenditure etc; and X is the income per head of the family. The regression is run separately for the male and female-headed households. The slopes coefficients are therefore represent the marginal propensities.

Table-7 reveals that marginal propensity to save, spend on education, health care is much higher in case female headed household than those of male-headed household. On the other hand, in case of other expenditures, the propensity is comparatively higher and significant for the male head than that of female head. For medical expenditure the coefficient is even insignificant in case of male head.

Table-7: Marginal Propensity to Save, Spend on Education, Health Care and Others of male and Female Headed Households of the Survey Families

Category	Male Headed Household			Female Headed Household		
	Coefficient	T-value	R ²	Coefficient	T-value	R ²
Savings	0.813	18.56	0.908	0.823	25.41	0.92
Education	0.0059	2.32	0.133	0.061	3.72	0.24
Medical	0.000097	0.0094	0.28	0.049	3.26	0.20
Other	0.0057	2.86	0.22	0.0010	1.63	0.45

Source: Field survey

Note: Figures in the parentheses represents percentage to total.

Table-8: Percentage of Family under Below Poverty Line across the Sex of Heads

Sex of the Head	BPL	APL
Male	3 (8.1)	34 (91.9)
Female	14 (24.1)	44 (75.9)
Total	17 (17.9)	78 (82.1)

Source: Field survey

Note: Figures in the parentheses represents percentage to total.

From table-8 we observe that incidence of poverty is relatively more in case female headed household than that of male-headed household. Also the occupational status of the heads, which yields people some position in the family and society, is shown in the table-9.

Table-9: Occupational Pattern of the Heads across Sexes and Education

Sex	Educational Qualification	Cultivator	Agri-Labourer	Govt. Service	Pvt. Service	Business	House wife	Old Age	Other
Male	Illiterate	0	4	0	2	0	0	1	0
	< Madhyamic	4	7	1	3	2	0	0	1
	> Madhyamic	0	2	6	1	2	0	0	1
	Sub-total	4 (10.8)	13 (35.1)	7 (18.9)	6 (16.2)	4 (10.8)	0 (00)	1 (2.7)	2 (5.4)
Female	Illiterate	1	7	0	0	2	2	4	2
	< Madhyamic	2	6	1	2	8	3	4	5
	> Madhyamic	0	0	4	1	3	0	0	1
	Sub-total	3 (5.2)	13 (22.4)	5 (8.6)	3 (5.2)	13 (22.4)	5 (8.6)	8(13.8)	7 (12.1)

Source: Same as Table-1

Note: Same as table-1

From the table-9 it is clear that because of lower educational background female heads are comparatively less in government and private services but they are more in business (here actually petty businesses). Earlier women were also predominant in agriculture. Bur now-a-days men are increasingly participating in agriculture as cultivator or agricultural labourer. On the whole, female are relatively in lower level occupation than their counterpart men in our study area.

Social and Psychological Status:

First of all we have considered the understanding and feeling about male and female children. If we look at the composition of the families (not shown here), we find in both male and female-headed cases on an average, percentage of female children is more than the percentage of male children for all categories of sex and education of the head of households. Table-10 represents the distribution of households according to their attitude towards the sex of children.

The table shows that most of the male and female heads express their independent attitude towards the sex of child. Of course, the percentage of heads prefers female child is more than the percentage of heads prefers male child and that increases with the level of education in both cases of male and female head. In Khasi society the dowry is absent and girls also participate in different socio-economic

activities and that plays an important role for the non-discrimination between the sexes of child.

Table-10: Education and Sex-wise Distribution of Households According to Attitude towards the Sex of Child

Sex of Head	Educational Qualification	Preference for				Total
		Male Child	Female Child	Equally both	Cannot say	
Male	Illiterate	0	0	4	3	7
	< Madhyamic	2	1	8	7	18
	> Madhyamic	0	0	12	0	12
	Sub-total	2 (5.4)	1 (2.7)	24 (64.9)	10 (27.0)	37 (100)
Female	Illiterate	2	2	5	9	18
	< Madhyamic	4	8	10	9	31
	> Madhyamic	1	2	5	1	9
	Sub-total	7 (12.1)	12 (20.7)	20 (34.5)	19 (32.8)	58 (100)

Source: Same as Table-1; Note: Same as table-1

Also the nature and timing of food intake by the females shows their position in the family as well as society. Though customarily it is presumed that is out of love and affection the mother of sisters in the family take food after their husband, brothers or children. But in many cases it happens to be the fact that the wives wait even with hunger for their husbands to return from office, business or farm and take food after their counterparts. It however indicates the psychological position of the females in the family in the name of sacrifice. However the females in the Khasi families take food whenever they think it is necessary (as shown in table-11) and in that sense they are more independent.

Table-11: Distribution of Female Heads according to Relative Timing of Food Intake vis-à-vis other Member's of the Family

Taking Food				Total
Together	After Male	Whenever Needed/Convenience	Any Other	
4 (6.9)	0	54 (93.1)	0	58 (100)

Source: Same as Table-1; Note: Same as table-1

In the society if women can work and participate in different social and entertaining activities freely their position improves than if they cannot. In the backward traditional societies, normally women do not become member even of any such social organisation. In rural areas of Meghalaya also we find very few women especially the well educated one are member of similar organisation compared to men as shown in table-12.

Table-12: Sex-wise Distribution of Head According to Membership of Club, Community Centre, Social Organisation or NGO

Sex	Member	Non-Member	Total
Male	12 (32.43)	25 (67.57)	37 (100)
Female	2 (3.45)	56 (96.55)	58 (100)

Source: Same as Table-1, Note: Same as table-1

Table-13: Education-wise Distribution of Female Heads according to Participation in Meeting/Function/Fete etc outside the Village

Education	Participation in Social Meeting, Social Gathering, Function etc			Total
	Alone	With men/women of the same or other family	Others	
Illiterate	17 (94.4)	1 (5.6)	0 (00)	18 (100)
< Madhyamic	23 (74.2)	6 (19.4)	2 (6.5)	31 (100)
> Madhyamic	9 (100)	0	0	9 (100)
Total	49 (84.5)	7 (12.1)	3 (3.4)	58 (100)

Though most of the females are not the member of different social organisations or clubs, they can move alone freely and join any party, function or ceremony and mostly without the permission of senior or male members. The tendency is more for the more and more educated females and also with the increase in age (table-13 and 14). Therefore education makes the female to think independently and act without any fear even in the villages of Meghalaya.

Table-14: Age-wise Distribution of Female Heads Visit nearest Town With/Without the Permission of Men

Age	Yes	No	Total
20-40	15 (83.3)	3 (16.7)	18
41-60	28 (90.3)	3 (9.7)	31
> 60	8 (89.0)	1 (11.0)	9

Source: Same as Table-1

Note: Same as table-1

Perception of male and female about whether the female would remain economically and non-economically dependent on men provides another indicator of status of the women in the society. Similarly the independence of the attitudes can also be known from the thinking of women about remarriage even after the death of their husbands. Table-15 shows that most of the male as well female heads think that the females would be independent of men economically and non-economically. Only a few (about 17 per cent of female heads) think they are much dependent on their male counterpart. Table-16 however indicates that there is no much difference between those

who agree with the idea of remarriage after their husbands' death than those who do not. The percentage of agreement increases with the level of education. The implication is that even though the educated females acquire the ability to think better and earn the capability of economic independence, a major part of them do not want to remain in isolation of male counterpart. That may of course be because of future security.

Table-15: Sex-wise Distribution of Heads according to their Thinking of Women's Dependence on Men

Sex	Thinking about Dependency of Women on Men			Total
	Yes	No	Not Sure	
Male	8 (21.6)	21 (56.8)	8 (21.6)	37
Female	10 (17.2)	40 (69.0)	8 (13.8)	58

Table-16: Education-wise Distribution of Female Heads according to Opinion about Remarriage after Husband's Death

Education	Should Marry after Husband's Death				Total
	Agree	Do not Agree	Not Sure	No Comment	
Illiterate	6 (33.33)	6 (33.33)	6 (33.33)	0 (00)	18 (100)
< Madhyamic	9 (29.0)	9 (29.0)	10 (32.3)	3 (9.7)	31 (100)
> Madhyamic	4 (44.4)	00	5 (55.6)	00	9 (100)
Total	19 (32.8)	15 (25.9)	21 (36.2)	3 (5.2)	58 (100)

Source: Same as Table-1, Note: Same as table-1

Political Status:

Though female in Meghalaya is much aware about their rights and position in the society, in political hardly any women actively participate. Even the society does not allow women to participate in political decision-making. Till now any woman Headman of a Dorbar is hardly found. Also they do not participate much into political discourses. Only recently women are allowed on a very limited scale to participate in Dorbar meeting. Though women in Khasi society are relatively free, still there are discriminations (social and psychological) as explained above, yet the women are not much interested into politics. Actually most of the rural women think even reservation of seat for the females in the local bodies or Dorbar is not beneficial to them. The opinion of both male and female heads in this regard is presented in table-17. Even some of the females do not bother about whether their name is in the electoral role or not. Of course most of the female exercise their franchise in the election and that percentage increases with the rise in educational level of the rural females as is observed from the table-18.

Table-17: Sex-wise Distribution of Heads according to the Opinion about Reservation of Seats for Members in the Local Bodies (Gram Panchayat/ Dorbar)

Sex	Very Bad	Bad	Not so Bad	Good	Very Good	No Idea	Total
Male	22 (59.5)	4 (10.8)	5 (13.5)	1 (2.7)	0 (0)	5 (13.5)	37
Female	35 (60.3)	11 (19.0)	2 (3.4)	2 (3.4)	0 (0)	8 (13.8)	58

Source: Same as Table-1

Note: Same as table-1

Table-18: Education and Sex-wise Distribution of Households According to Inclusion and Exclusion of Head in the Voting List and Exercising Voting Right

Sex of Head	Educational Qualification	Name included in the Voting List		Exercise Voting Power	
		Yes	No	Yes	No
Male	Illiterate	5	2	5	2
	< Madhyamic	16	2	16	2
	> Madhyamic	11	1	11	1
	Sub-total	32	5	32	5
Female	Illiterate	14	4	14	4
	< Madhyamic	29	2	29	2
	> Madhyamic	8	1	8	1
	Sub-total	51	7	51	7

Source: Same as Table-1

Note: Same as table-1

Influence of Print and Mass Media on the Women:

Women of even rural Meghalaya have some access to mass and print media and that plays an important role in raising awareness among them. Though relatively more percentage of male read newspaper the women are also not lagging behind. More than 66 per cent of women heads read newspaper daily or occasionally (table-19). Considering the percentage of illiteracy, relatively more females have access to newspaper. Though radio is also available in most of the families now-a-days relatively less percentage of people listen radio, which is true for both male and female (table-20). Although people are crazy about TV now-a-day, about 41 per cent of female head watch different TV programmes either regularly or occasionally in the sample areas. Where as about 70 per cent of male heads watch TV regularly or occasionally (table-21).

Actually in our sample we have seen many female-headed household who are very poor and hence they do not have TV at home and hence less access to TV programmes. Moreover, they always remain busy for earning their sustenance and thus relatively very less time available for watching any programme of entertainment or other social relevance.

Table-19: Distribution of Heads according to Reading of Newspapers

Sex of Head	Education	Reading Newspaper			Total
		Everyday	Occasionally	Never	
Male	Illiterate	3	3	1	7
	< Madhyamic	6	8	4	18
	> Madhyamic	9	3	0	12
	Sub-total	18 (48.7)	14 (37.8)	5 (13.5)	37 (100)
Female	Illiterate	2	5	11	18
	< Madhyamic	10	13	8	31
	> Madhyamic	7	2	0	9
	Sub-total	19 (32.8)	20 (34.5)	19 (32.8)	58 (100)

Table-20: Distribution of Heads according to Listening Radio

Sex of Head	Education	Listening Radio			Total
		Everyday	Occasionally	Never	
Male	Illiterate	2	1	4	7
	< Madhyamic	3	12	3	18
	> Madhyamic	7	4	1	12
	Sub-total	12 (32.4)	17 (46.0)	8 (21.6)	37 (100)
Female	Illiterate	2	2	14	18
	< Madhyamic	6	12	13	31
	> Madhyamic	5	2	2	9
	Sub-total	13 (22.4)	16 (27.6)	29 (50.0)	58 (100)

Table-21: Distribution of Heads according to Television Watcher

Sex of Head	Education	Watching Television			Total
		Everyday	Occasionally	Never	
Male	Illiterate	2	1	4	7
	< Madhyamic	8	4	6	18
	> Madhyamic	7	4	1	12
	Sub-total	17 (46.0)	9 (24.3)	11 (29.7)	37 (100)
Female	Illiterate	3	1	14	18
	< Madhyamic	8	6	17	31
	> Madhyamic	3	3	3	9
	Sub-total	14 (24.1)	10 (17.2)	34 (58.6)	58 (100)

Source: Same as Table-1

Note: Same as table-1

Concluding Remarks:

Though Meghalaya is known as the matrilineal society, now many of the families are headed by the males. The tendency is increasing with the increasing involvement of male in the socio-economic activities, expansion of education, emergence of nuclear families etc.

However in the family there is no discrimination among the male and female child. This is partly because of the economic independence of the females and their customary laws, which is still dominant in the rural areas.

Though traditionally the women (especially the youngest one) are supposed to inherit ancestral property, men also inherit property under different circumstances.

Though earlier female used to dominate in the field of various economic activities now-a-days male also involved in different activities. Relatively more females are illiterate than male. Data reveals that, now the high collar jobs are mostly occupied by the males and the income of the female-headed households are relatively less and associated with significant inter-family variation. Also incidence of poverty is more in case of female-headed household. Yet the female better manage the family and give more emphasis on the human development indicators like education, health etc.

Women in the rural Khasi society are free from any limitation and can participate freely in any function of social and religious importance. Also they can move freely without the company of male or others and without the permission of male or other seniors. So there is very less insecurity problem unlike the other societies of plain areas. But psychologically the rural women are not free and they feel much dependent on men.

Still now, the rural Khasi women are not well aware of their political rights or they may be reluctant to do so. To them political decision-making is not much important. Though local body like Dorbar is much powerful, their participation in such bodies also minimal. Even most of them do not believe in reservation in the local bodies or other constitutional areas that would help raising their status in the society. Rather they like to devote more on their social and economic activities for their welfare.

It is however essential to adopt measures for the improvement of education, income of the females to fill the gap between male and female. As female manage family better they would be able to further the welfare of the family members and thus the society. Also the females may be pursued to take part in decision making democratically so that they can work in more organised way and empower themselves.

References:

Human Development Report, 1997

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