

Policies And Implementation On Women Empowerment In Meghalaya

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Abstract-

Women play a vital role in development. Empowering a woman creates power in her life, society and community. Government policies and programmes are important to create opportunities without restrictions. Specific targeted policies of government and their effective implementation can help women equipped and empowered. This paper attempts to discuss the policies related with women empowerment and their implementation through concerned departments in Meghalaya.

Keyterms- *women, empowerment, government, policies, schemes*

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I. Objective

The highlighted objective of the paper is to study the need for women empowerment and to analyse specific targeted policies through schemes and their implementation for women empowerment through concerned government departments in Meghalaya.

II. Methodology

This paper is basically descriptive in nature. The study relies purely on secondary sources available from books, articles and internet sources.

III. Introduction

Empowerment is a process that enables individuals or a group of individuals to realise their full identity and powers in all spheres of life. It consist of greater access to knowledge and resources, greater autonomy in decision making to enable them to have greater ability to plan their lives, or have greater control over the circumstances that influence their lives and free them from shackles imposed on them by custom, belief and practice.¹ Women empowerment and improvement of their political, social, economic and health status is highly important because if one woman is empowered the benefits are spread automatically over the whole society.

Most current definition of women's empowerment seem to have drawn upon Amartya Sen's articulation of Development as Freedom where development is about expanding people's choices.² According to Sen, freedom is the goal and means of development. Bennett defines empowerment as "the enhancement of assets and capabilities of diverse individuals and groups to engage, influence and hold accountable the institutions which affect them."³ Geeta Sen defines empowerment as "altering relations of power...which constrain women's options and autonomy and adversely affect health and well-being."⁴ Most definitions of empowerment agree that women themselves have a right to make choices and should be involved in determining which choices make the most sense for them and their families.⁵ Kabeer defines it as "the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them."⁶ Empowerment is thus, understood as outcome, such as improvement in education, health, and economic and political participation. The most common indicators are capabilities, education and health in particular, and control over economic and political resources and decision-making.

Charmes and Wieringa have defined a Women's Empowerment Matrix that consists of six dimensions - physical, socio-cultural, religious, economic, political, legal - and six levels: individual, household, community, state, region, and global.⁷

Government Schemes for Women Empowerment

The Government of Meghalaya has implemented various schemes which have special components for women empowerment. These schemes were operated by different department and ministries. The implementation of these schemes is monitored specifically with reference to women. Some of them are as follows:

IV. Economic Benefits Schemes

Empowering women economically is one of the targets aimed by government departments. Schemes focusing on improving the economic status of women are formulated from time to time and one such scheme is the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS). The scheme was sponsored by the Central government and in Meghalaya the scheme runs through the Community and Rural Development Department

The Government of India passed the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 in September 2005. "The objective of the Act is to enhance livelihood security in rural areas by providing at least 100 days of guaranteed wage employment in a financial year to every household whose adult members volunteered to do unskilled manual work."⁸ Implementation of the Act calls for the formulation of National Rural Employment Guarantee Schemes by the state government. The state has notified the scheme under the act, known as the Meghalaya Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme on 28th July, 2006. The scheme is being implemented as centrally sponsored scheme on a cost sharing basis between centre and state in the ratio of 90:10. As per instruction by the Government of India, the state in 2011 had created a society namely the State Rural Employment Society (SRES) headed by the Mission Director to oversee the overall implementation of the scheme. Since Meghalaya is not within the purview of Part IX of the Indian Constitution, Panchayati Raj Institutions does not exist and hence new Institutions have to be explored for the implementation of MGNREGS. These institutions were called Village Employment Council (VEC) and Area Employment Council (AEC). MGNREGS focuses on the economic and social empowerment of women.

The implementation of the MGNREGS in Meghalaya is a very important milestone in so far as women participation in the grassroot development process is concerned. The scheme specifically allowed women to become members and office bearers of the VEC and AEC. The role of VEC is very significant not only for providing employment and livelihood, but also it gives ample scope for women empowerment in Meghalaya. This ensured participation of women in planning and implementation of the schemes at different levels.

National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) is another centrally sponsored scheme that was launched on June 2011 where the beneficiaries include the rural poor and destitute women. "The mission of the scheme is to reduce poverty by enabling the poor households to access gainful employment and skilled wage employment opportunities, resulting in appreciable improvement in their livelihoods on a sustainable basis, through building strong grassroots institutions of the poor."⁹ For implementation of the scheme, an autonomous society in the name of Meghalaya State Rural Livelihood Society (MSRLS) headed by the Chief Executive Officer was created in 2012. The programme is rolled out in four pilot Blocks viz, Dalu C and RD Block, Rongram C and RD Block, Mairang C and RD Block and Mawkyrwat C and RD Block. During 2016-2017, implementation of the scheme has been expanded to four blocks viz, Umsning, Mawkyrnrew, Resubelpara and Laskein C and RD Block. Fund for the programme is shared by the central and state government in the ratio 90:10.

Training Centre for Self Employment for Women is another scheme implemented in Shillong, Jowai and Tura with a capacity of 40:40:25 respectively through the Social Welfare Department. It is 100% sponsored by the state where the beneficiaries include destitute women. The purpose of the scheme is giving training to destitute women on different trades like tailoring, knitting, embroidery and weaving. On completion of training, the trainees are given a token grant of 3500/- to 5000/- each to enable them to start their self employment ventures.¹⁰

The Social Welfare Department have set up three training centers (one each in Shillong, Tura and Jowai), for women to provide vocational skills and training in knitting, tailoring, embroidery and weaving to enable them to support themselves and be self employed. In Shillong, the number of women trainees at present is 974. In Tura there are 932 number of women trainees, whereas in Jowai the number of trainees under the scheme is 694.

Another centrally sponsored scheme that runs through the Social Welfare Department in all districts of Meghalaya is the **Working Women's Hostels**. The scheme provides financial assistance to voluntary organisation the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) provides assistance in the form of grants-in-aid for construction of hostel building for working women. The objective of the scheme is to provide safe and economical hostel accommodation to women employees who are posted outside their hometown.¹¹ In Meghalaya three NGOs viz. Young Women Christian Association, Khasi Jaintia Presbyterian Synod Shillong

and Garo Baptist Convention Tura were funded by MWCD. The young Women Christian Association and Khasi Jaintia Presbyterian Synod Shillong had accommodated 54 and 84 working women respectively.

Computer Operator and Programming Assistant is sponsored by the state and is implemented through the Social Welfare Department in all districts. The Department in collaboration with Ram Krishna Mission, Shillong introduced the scheme in 1995 for providing training in computer operator and programming to destitute, orphans and deserted women so as to enable them to be economically independent.¹² In Shillong, many women have been trained under the scheme while others have been employed in government set up and private agencies.

Support to Training and Employment Programme for Women (STEP) is another centrally sponsored scheme that runs through the Social Welfare Department in all districts. The programme was launched in 1987 with the aim to upgrade the skills of poor and marginalised women. The objective of the scheme is to provide employment to them on a sustainable basis in the traditional sectors of agriculture, veterinary, fisheries, handlooms and handicrafts.¹³ Meghalaya Apex Handloom Weavers and Handicrafts Co-Operative Federation received assistance from government of India under STEP for training women in handloom and sericulture.

V. Maternity Benefits Scheme

New initiatives to improve the health status of pregnant mothers were launched by the government and one such initiatives is the **Pradhan Mantri Surakshit Matritva Abhiyan (PMSMA)**. The scheme is sponsored by the Central Government of which the beneficiaries are pregnant Women. PMSMA is a new initiative of the Indian Government launched on 9th June 2016. The scheme has been launched with the objective of boosting the health care facilities of pregnant women, especially the poor. Under this scheme, the pregnant women will be given free health check up and required treatment for free on 9th of every month.¹⁴ The scheme is applicable for pregnant women to avail in all government hospitals across the country.

Pradhan Mantri Matritva Vandana Yojana (PMMVY) previously called the **Indira Gandhi Matritva Sahyog Yojaya (IGMSY)** is a scheme sponsored by the Central Government where the beneficiaries are pregnant and lactating mothers. It is implemented through the Social Welfare Department only in East Garo Hills District. The objective of the scheme is to improve the health and nutrition status of pregnant and lactating women and their young infants. The scheme projects at promoting appropriate practice, care and institutional service utilisation during pregnancy, delivery and lactation, encouraging the women to follow nutrition and feeding practices, including early and exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months and providing cash incentives for improved health and nutrition to pregnant and lactating mothers. The scheme aims to provide partial compensation for the wage loss so that the woman is not under compulsion to work till the last stage of pregnancy and can take adequate rest before and after delivery.¹⁵

Another maternity benefits scheme is the **National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP)** is sponsored by the Centre where the beneficiaries are pregnant women, senior citizens and BPL Families. The NSAP is a 100 percent centrally sponsored scheme under which assistance is provided for social security to poor households in line with the Directive Principles enshrined in Article 41 and 42 of the constitution. The programme came into effect on 15th August 1995 and has three components: a. National Old Age Pension Scheme (NOAPS) b. National Family Benefit Scheme (NFBS) c. National Maternity Benefit Scheme (NMBS)¹⁶

VI. Educational Benefits Scheme

The schemes that fall under this category aimed at enhancing the educational status of girls in India and one such scheme is the **Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescent Girls (RGS-EAG)-SABLA**. It is sponsored by both the central and state government with a share of 50:50. The targeted beneficiaries are adolescent girls. The objective of the scheme is to enable self development and empowerment of adolescent girls, improve their nutrition and health status, spreading awareness among them about health, hygiene, nutrition, adolescent reproductive and sexual health, family and child care, to upgrade their home-based skills, life skills and vocational skills, to mainstream out of school adolescent girls into formal/non formal education and to inform and guide them about existing public services such as PHC,CHC,Post office, Bank, police station, etc.¹⁷ The scheme is implemented in 22 ICDS Projects in West Garo Hills, South Garo Hills and East Khasi Hills District.

Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) is an educational scheme that was launched in 2001. The scheme is to provide quality education for all children at the elementary level between the age group of 6-14 years. The SSA focuses mainly on access to education, social and gender equity and quality of education imparted to the children.¹⁸

Maulana Azad National Scholarship Scheme was introduced on April, 2007 and valid upto 31st March 2020. The objective of the scheme is to recognise, promote and assist Meritorious Girls student

belonging to minorities (Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Sikhs) who cannot continue their education without financial support.¹⁹ There were 33 Boards/councils covered under the scheme and Meghalaya Board of School Education is one of them.

VII. Other Women Related Schemes

There are also other women related schemes such as the **Supplementary Nutrition Programme in Urban Areas** that runs through the Social Welfare Department in all the districts of Meghalaya. It is 100 percent state sponsored programme. The beneficiaries to the scheme include children within 6 months to 6 years of age, pregnant and nursing mothers and adolescent girls (11-19 Years).²⁰ The purpose of the scheme is to provide nutrition to all beneficiaries of all district headquarters in Meghalaya through voluntary organisations. Foodstuffs like Bengal gram, soyabean, semolina, groundnuts, flour, dried peas, green peas and milk powder is also given to the beneficiaries. In the year 2009-2010, the number of S.N.P centres in each district is 41.

Swadhar Greh- A Scheme for Women in Difficult Circumstances is another scheme that runs through the Social Welfare Department in all districts of Meghalaya. The beneficiaries include the homeless and shelter less BPL families. The scheme is meant to provide temporary accommodation maintenance and rehabilitative service to women and girls rendered and homeless due to family discord, crime, violence, mental stress, social ostracism and to rehabilitate them economically and emotionally.²¹

Having discussed the various policies and schemes implemented by the government of Meghalaya, the paper also tries to focus on the different aspects of women empowerment from three spheres such as the political, economic and social.

VIII. Aspects Of Women’s Empowerment

Political Empowerment

Political empowerment includes women’s representation on law making bodies. The state of Meghalaya attained full- fledged statehood on January 21, 1972. But looking back at the past history of its legislative Assembly and general election to the union legislature, representation of women lags far behind. Electoral politics is still considered as the domain of men. It appears that women themselves are not interested in contesting elections maybe of the fact that they are so embedded into the traditional belief that politics is the arena of men only. So far from 1972 to 2018, only 18 women candidates have won in the State Assembly election of 60 seats. A brief survey of the number of women elected representatives to the State Assembly from 1972- 2018 is listed below.

Table 1: Number of women’s representation in the State Legislative Assembly

Year	Total number of women candidates	Number of women candidates elected
1972	09	01
1978	07	01
1983	08	Nil
1988	03	02
1993	07	01
1998	14	03
2003	14	02
2008	21	01
2013	25	04
2018	32	03
2023	36	03

Source: *Meghalaya Election Handbook*, website of the Chief Electoral Officer Meghalaya

From Table 1, it is revealed that from the year 1972 till 2018, not more than four women candidates were elected to the State Assembly. In 1983, it is discouraging to see that none of the women candidates were able to win any seat. In the latest 2018 Assembly elections we find that women’s access to political participation and to higher positions in the political structure has been growing but when we look at the number of women being elected to the Legislative Assembly, it is pretty disheartened to see that at present only three women candidates are represented in the Assembly of Sixty seats.

Turning our attention to traditional institutions like the dorbar shnongs, women lack representation in these institutions as well. The headman or the rangbah shnong, for instance, can only be a man. It is clear that women in Meghalaya have not been accepted as policy formulators and decision makers.

From a general point of view, in order to increase women’s representation in law making bodies, quota system has been adopted. India is among the countries that have passed legislation on 33% reservation for women to increase their participation in local self government, panchayat institution as provided under the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution of India. With no Panchayati Raj system in place in Meghalaya, the question of 33 percent reservation does not apply in the state. A need is felt to extend this reservation to parliament and legislative assemblies as well as the Autonomous District Councils. Fortunately, the Women’s Reservation Bill was passed in 2023 to reserve 33% of all seats in the Lok Sabha and in all state legislative assemblies.

Inadequate representation of women in law making bodies makes them vulnerable and voiceless. It is in this context that women’s greater political representation becomes necessary.

IX. Economic Empowerment

Economic empowerment is the capacity of poor women and men to participate in, contribute to and benefit from growth processes on terms which recognise the value of their contributions, respect their dignity and make it possible for them to negotiate a fairer distribution of the benefits of growth.²² Economic empowerment increases women’s access to economic resources and opportunities including jobs, financial services, property and other productive assets, skills development and market information.²³ Empowering women economically is one of the most powerful routes for them to achieve their potential and advance their rights. A woman is economically empowered when she has both the ability to succeed and advance economically and the power to make and act on economic decisions.²⁴

In the new changing situation, we find that women in Meghalaya are seen to be involved in wider economic activities. An educated woman has economic independence by going to government offices and jobs or any other occupation and does not have to depend on her husband financially. The uneducated women find their place in the markets where they are seen to sell different commodities that helps support her family. Yet the economic participation of women in the state is less when compared with males.

The paper also tries to briefly examine some of the indicators of the economic status of women in Meghalaya by highlighting the workforce and the labour participation rate so as to understand the economic participation of women in the state which is shown in the following table 2.

Table 2: Workforce participation rate in Meghalaya 2011 census

Rural			Urban			Combined		
Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total
35.0	47.0	41.0	23.6	47.68	35.63	32.67	47.17	39.96

Source: *Census of India 2011*, Office of the Registrar General, India

According to Table 2, in 2011, the workforce participation rate in the rural areas was 35.0 and 47.0 percent for women and men respectively. The female participation rate in the rural areas was relatively less than that of the males. In the urban areas, the workforce participation rate is 23.6 and 47.68 percent for women and men respectively. It is observed that the female participation rate in the urban areas was also less than that of males. Taking into account the workforce participation rate in both the rural and urban areas, female workforce rate is 32.67 percent whereas the male workforce rate is 47.17 percent.

Table 3: Labour Force Participation Rate in Meghalaya: 2011-12

Rural			Urban		
Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total
39.2	52.9	46.1	21.0	51.5	35.0

Source- National Sample Survey Office, July 2011- June 2012

From Table 3, it is revealed that the total labour force participation rate in the rural areas is 46.1 percent of which 39.2 percent are females and 52.9 percent are males. Whereas in the urban areas, the total labour force rate is 35.0 percent of which 21.0 percent are females and 51.5 percent are males. It is observed that the labour force participation rate of women is comparatively less than that of the males.

Considering these insights, policy makers in Meghalaya and in India as a whole have taken a comprehensive approach to improve women’s economic participation. Measures and programmes through government schemes which in turn contribute to the economic empowerment of women are discussed in the later part of this paper.

X. Social Empowerment Through Education And Health Care

Social empowerment is understood as the process of developing a sense of autonomy and self confidence. The paper tries to project on how a woman’s health care and education is an instrumental link to social empowerment.

Health care: Women’s health is of prime importance to create a healthy society. Addressing women’s health is becoming more and more important because it has a direct impact on the social and economic aspect of the country. It is also crucial to the health of children they will bear as Children constitute the future generations.

As revealed by the National Family Health Survey-4 (2015-16) the state of women’s health in Meghalaya is worrisome. When it comes to anaemic women and adolescent girls, 56.2 percent women in the age group 15-49 were anaemic. One of the reasons for these poor health conditions is because just 23.5 percent of the mothers have full antenatal care with just 20.9 percent mothers are from rural areas. 50 percent had four antenatal care visits and only 53 percent had their antenatal checkups in the first trimester. Moreover, just 36.2 percent of expecting mothers consumed iron folic acid for 100 days or more in which 33.2 percent constitutes mothers from rural areas and 53.8 percent are from urban areas. Institutional delivery is 88.1 percent in urban areas and 45.7 percent in rural areas. The probability for both mother and child remaining healthy is higher if the delivery occurs within the premises of a health care facility. Unfortunately, institutional delivery in the rural areas is unsatisfactory. The survey also highlighted the rate of children age 12-23 months fully immunised which stands at just 61.4 percent out of which 81.4 percent are urban children and 58.4 percent are children from the rural areas. Children under age 6 months exclusively breastfed constitutes only 35.8 percent out of which 34.7 percent are urban and 36.0 percent are rural children.

There can be no sustainable development without women’s empowerment and there can be no women’s empowerment without access to health services. Empowering women and improving the health status of women requires concerted efforts through government policies and programmes

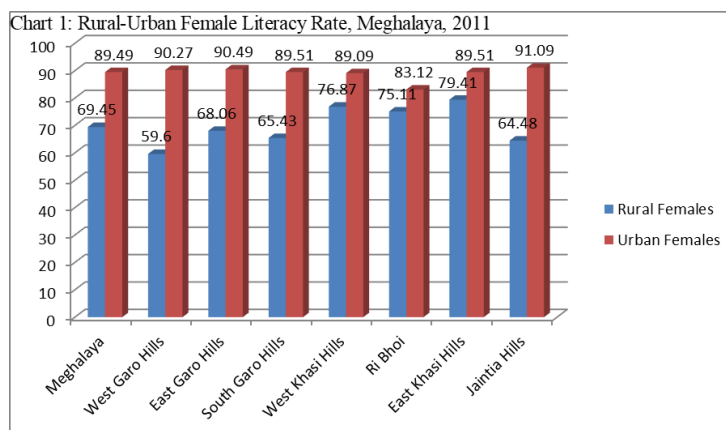
Education: Education had been regarded as a key to women’s empowerment. There is a direct correlation between women’s health, education and empowerment. In most cases lack of education and access to affordable health care continue to prevent women from enjoying good health. The most successful social policies that have improved education and health outcomes are various conditional cash and asset transfer policies.²⁵ These programs involved funding from the state to institutions for education and health care, funds supported textbooks and uniforms to financial aid and in-kind assistance, take-home food, and in school canteens. Building schools in rural areas, separate latrines for girls, and providing childcare facilities for teen mothers, and teacher training are all important aspects for increasing girls’ enrolment and continued school attendance (UNESCO:2008). Government policies are one of the vital means through which girls education can be improved.

Table 4: Share of Girls Enrolment (All Schools)

Percentage share of Girls enrolment	Category	Academic Year		
		2012-13	2013-14	2014-15
	Lower Primary	50.08	50.08	49.94
	Upper Primary	52.96	53.15	52.72
	Secondary	53.86	53.48	53.29

Source: State Education Mission Authority of Meghalaya (SEMAM)

According to Table 4, it is revealed that girls enrolment in the lower primary level is 50.08 percent in the reporting period of 2012-13 and 2013-14, while in the year 2014-15 it is 49.94 percent. In the upper primary level the enrolment of girls in the year 2012-13 is 52.96 percent, whereas in the year 2013-14 it is 53.15 percent, while in the year 2014-15 it is 52.72 percent. In the secondary level the share of girls enrolment stands at 53.86 percent in the year 2012-13, while in the year 2013-14 it is 53.48 and in the year 2014-15 it is 53.29 percent. It is observed that enrolment of girl students in Meghalaya is comparatively low at the lower primary level. The paper also tries to bring out the literacy rate of women in the rural and urban areas in the year 2011



Source-Census of India 2011

From chart 1, it is clear seen that the total literacy rate of urban women in Meghalaya is 89.49 percent whereas rural women constitute 69.45 percent. In West Garo Hills there are 90.27 percent of literate women in urban areas and only 59.6 percent are literate women residing in the rural areas. In East Garo Hills the literacy rate of urban women stands at 90.49 percent whereas 68.06 percent are literate women residing in the rural areas. In South Garo Hills, literate women residing in urban areas constitute 89.51 percent whereas 65.43 percent are rural women. In West Khasi Hills and Ri Bhoi, the literacy rate of women in urban areas is 89.09 percent and 83.12 percent respectively whereas literacy rate of women in rural areas in West Khasi Hills is 76.87 percent and in Ri Bhoi is 75.11 percent. In East Khasi Hills and Jaintia Hills the literacy rate of urban women stands at 89.51 percent and 91.09 percent respectively. While the literacy rate of rural women in East Khasi Hills is 79.41 percent and in Jaintia Hills it is 64.48 percent.

It is thus observed that the literacy rate of women residing in the rural areas of Meghalaya is comparatively low to that of women in the urban areas.

XI. Conclusion

The empowerment of women through the improvement of their political, social and economic status is a highly essential. In the present scenario, we can say that inspite of the availability of women empowerment schemes in Meghalaya yet the background of women empowerment seems to be comparatively low and needs to be checked. At the political level the women's participation in politics is minimal since there is lack of reservation of seats for women in traditional institutions as well as the District Council. At the economic level we find that the workforce and the labour force participation rate of women in economic activities is comparatively low compared to males. Turning our attention to the health sector, inspite of the availability of health care schemes, women's health especially in the rural areas is worrisome. Institutional delivery in Meghalaya is unsatisfactory and the educational level of rural women is comparatively low compared to the urban women. In this context, women empowerment through effective implementation of policies and schemes is expected to reach the desired level of empowerment.

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