



## **Voices from the Hills: A Comparative Study of Women's Education and Empowerment in Northeast India**

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### **ARTICLE DETAILS**

**Research Paper**

**Accepted:** 18-04-2025

**Published:** 10-05-2025

**Keywords:**

*North east, Women,  
Matrilineal, Meghalaya,  
Khasi*

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### **ABSTRACT**

Although men and women occupy the same place geographically, women are often seen as inferior to males globally. However, there is a notion that women's status is greater in the country's North Eastern Region when compared to the average for women across India. This research attempted to assess the status of women in the North Eastern Region. The data reveals that women in the region outperform the rest of the country in some categories. According to the indications, women in the North Eastern Region have relatively little freedom of movement and control over their own lives.

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**DOI :** <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15400965>

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### **INTRODUCTION**

#### ***A PROFILE OF NORTH-EAST INDIA***

The North East region of India, comprising eight states, is known for its stunning landscapes, diverse ethnic groups, and rich cultural heritage. It features lush hills, vibrant valleys, and wildlife, with a growing tourism sector focused on eco-tourism. Despite its challenges, the region offers natural beauty and hospitality (Das,2012).

#### ***STATUS OF WOMEN IN NORTH-EAST INDIA***

“And they are talking about escape,  
about liberty, men and guns,



Ah, the urgency for survival!  
But what will they do  
not knowing the sorrow of women? ”

- Mamang Dai, “The Sorrow of Women” (Kapai,2014)

In the North East of India, women hold significant roles, especially in matrilineal societies like the Khasi, Garo, and Jaintia tribes, where lineage is passed through the female line. They are actively involved in agriculture, crafts, and local markets. Despite this, challenges such as limited political representation, access to higher education, and economic empowerment persist. Nonetheless, women in the region are known for their resilience, activism, and leadership (Das,2013).

### **OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY**

- Study women's literacy rates in the Northeastern states, as well as hurdles to further education and vocational training.
- Examine the involvement of women in the economy, especially self-employment, and how patrilineal and matrilineal social systems affect women's responsibilities related with violence against women.
- Explore the cultural norms, traditions, and rituals specific to women in Northeastern tribes and communities.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The primary concern prior to feminism is inequality. It simplifies us in understanding the social reality. Women have a significant role in North-East India's post-independence society. Women's roles and status have evolved in urban as well as rural environments. In this study, an attempt was intended to study the strategies that promote a gender fair society. To explore the status of women in Northeast India, this study employs a qualitative research methodology grounded in secondary data analysis. By reviewing existing literature, government reports, census data and research papers covering aspects such as education, health, economic participation, and social status. These secondary data sources are critically analyzed to identify patterns and trends, providing insights into both historical and current contexts of women's lives in Northeast India.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The indicators used to look at the status of women in NE India are as follows.

### ❖ EDUCATION

Women's education in Northeast India has improved, with states like Mizoram, Meghalaya, and Nagaland exceeding the national female literacy rate, aided by cultural factors like the matrilineal Khasi community. However, challenges such as early marriage, economic pressures, and limited access in rural areas persist, causing high dropout rates. While government initiatives boost primary enrollment, disparities in quality and higher education opportunities remain. Urbanization and media shift attitudes, but limited local job options contribute to a "brain drain." Continued efforts are needed to improve access and support (Samantroy,2012).

**Table 1. Educational Status Of Women**

States	Literacy Rate	Gross Enrolment Rate (6-13 age)	Dropout Rates (6-16 age)
Sikkim	76.43	123.37	79.36
Arunachal Pradesh	59.57	138.1	64.7
Nagaland	76.69	83.45	73.97
Manipur	73.17	147.73	55.71
Mizoram	89.40	133.58	60.72
Tripura	83.15	121.74	62.34
Meghalaya	73.78	141.86	76.46
Assam	67.27	84.9	77.82

*Source : Census of India (2011)*

This dataset presents educational indicators across eight states in northeastern India. It includes literacy rates, gross enrolment rates for children aged 6-13, and dropout rates for children aged 6-16. Mizoram leads in literacy with an impressive 89.4%, followed closely by Tripura and Nagaland, while Arunachal Pradesh has the lowest literacy rate at 59.57%. Gross enrolment rates vary significantly, with Manipur at a high 147.73%, indicating possible over-age or under-age enrolment, while Nagaland and Assam have lower rates at 83.45% and 84.9%, respectively. Dropout rates are notably high across all states, with Sikkim at 79.36%, while Manipur has the lowest dropout rate at 55.71%, suggesting challenges in



retaining students beyond primary education in most states. This data reflects a mixed educational landscape with disparities in access and retention across northeastern India.

### ❖ *HEALTH*

Women's health in Northeast India is impacted by socio-cultural factors, geographic challenges, and limited healthcare access, especially in rural areas. Despite improvements in maternal health, issues like high maternal mortality, inadequate care, and traditional stigmas persist. Growing awareness and government efforts are working towards better healthcare outcomes for women (Das, 2013).

### ❖ *ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT*

Women's economic empowerment in Northeast India is growing, driven by their traditional roles in agriculture, weaving, and small businesses. Markets like Imphal's Ima Keithel highlight women's leadership. Government programs and NGOs support women through self-help groups and skill development. Despite challenges such as limited credit, infrastructure issues, and fewer job opportunities, women are pursuing higher education and entering diverse fields, signaling progress toward greater economic independence and empowerment (Samantroy,2012).

### ❖ *WORKFORCE PARTICIPATION*

Women's workforce participation in Northeast India surpasses the national average, driven by cultural norms and economic necessity. In states like Meghalaya, Nagaland, and Mizoram, tribal communities value women's economic independence, leading to high involvement in agriculture, artisanal work, and urban employment in sectors like education and healthcare. However, challenges such as limited career growth, skill training access, and informal employment persist, with educated women migrating for better opportunities, underscoring the need for local economic and career support (Dikshit & Dikshit, 2014).

**Table 3. Female Work Participation Rate**

States	FWPR
Sikkim	41.2
Arunachal Pradesh	45.1
Nagaland	56.5
Manipur	31.5

Mizoram	45.4
Tripura	26.6
Meghalaya	51.4
Assam	20.8

Source : NSSO(2010)

This dataset provides the Female Work Participation Rate (FWPR) across eight states in northeastern India. FWPR reflects the percentage of women actively engaged in the workforce in each state. Nagaland has the highest female participation rate at 56.5%, followed by Meghalaya (51.4%) and Mizoram (45.4%). On the lower end, Assam has the lowest FWPR at 20.8%, and Tripura follows with 26.6%. These figures highlight considerable variation in female workforce involvement across states, indicating potential differences in socioeconomic factors, cultural norms, and economic opportunities for women in each region.

#### ❖ ***PATRIARCHAL AND ATTITUDINAL ASPECTS***

- ***Inheritance & Property Rights***

Inheritance laws in Northeast India are diverse, with customary practices often overriding civil laws. Matrilineal communities like the Khasis and Garos in Meghalaya pass inheritance through women, while most other communities favor men. Many tribal customs exclude women from ancestral property, limiting their financial independence and family bargaining power (Das,2012).

- ***Wage Discrimination & Economic Participation***

In the Northeast, women are highly involved in agriculture, handicrafts, and informal work but face significant wage discrimination. Men dominate better-paying formal jobs, while women remain in low-wage or unpaid roles. Gender-based wage gaps persist, driven by stereotypes that men's work is more "productive" or "valuable."(Mentschel,2007).

- ***"Men are Men" Attitude & Decision-Making Power***

In the Northeast, traditional gender roles persist despite a progressive reputation. Men are often viewed as primary decision-makers, impacting women's mobility, choices, and autonomy (Mentschel,2007). Women's political representation in the Northeast remains low, limiting attention to critical issues like healthcare, education, and property rights, which

disproportionately affect women. This exclusion affects both household decisions and broader policy-making (Jamir,2021).

**Table 4. Women's Participation in Decision Making**

<b>States</b>	<b>Currently married women who usually participate in household decisions (%)</b>	<b>Women of age 15-49 who are allowed to go alone to three places (market, health facility, and outside the community)(%)</b>	<b>A bank or savings account that they themselves use (%)</b>
Sikkim	58.7	50.9	20.9
Arunachal Pradesh	53.5	40.2	19
Nagaland	73.1	25.4	7.4
Manipur	69.4	53.5	8
Mizoram	70.4	75.4	8.1
Tripura	30.2	36.8	18.7
Meghalaya	77.3	28.1	16.9
Assam	60.9	35.3	11.7

*Source : NFHS-3, Kishore and Gupta (2009)*

This dataset highlights indicators of women's autonomy and decision-making power. It includes three key metrics: (1) the percentage of currently married women who typically participate in household decisions, (2) the percentage of women aged 15-49 who are permitted to go alone to specific places (the market, a health facility, and outside the community), and (3) the percentage of women with a bank or savings account that they use themselves. Results vary widely by state; for instance, Meghalaya has the highest rate of household decision-making participation (77.3%), while Mizoram has the highest percentage of women allowed to travel alone to the specified places (75.4%). Access to individual bank accounts is generally low, with the highest rate in Sikkim at 20.9% and the lowest in Nagaland at 7.4%. These indicators provide insight into the varying levels of empowerment and independence of women across the region.



- ***Domestic Violence & Gender-Based Violence***

Patriarchal norms drive high rates of domestic and gender-based violence in Northeast India, with inadequate reporting systems and cultural reluctance in law enforcement, particularly in rural and tribal areas. Issues include forced sexual submission, alcoholism-related abuse, financial control over women's earnings, and dowry-related violence, especially in Assam (Vero,2020).

- ❖ ***MARRIAGE***

In northeastern India, women enjoy relatively higher social status, particularly in matrilineal societies like the Khasi, Garo, and Jaintia, where lineage passes through the mother. Women have more autonomy in choosing partners, and while arranged marriages are common, love marriages are increasingly accepted. Divorce and remarriage are socially accepted. Modern influences on education and economy are shaping marriage practices, blending traditional values with contemporary views on gender roles (Sikdar,2009).

**Table 5. Mean Age At Marriage Among Females**

States	MAMF
Sikkim	23.3
Arunachal Pradesh	22.5
Nagaland	21.7
Manipur	23.4
Mizoram	22.9
Tripura	22.3
Meghalaya	22.6
Assam	22.7

Source : Census of India (2011)

The dataset presents the mean age at marriage for females (MAMF). It highlights regional variations in the average age at which women marry, with values ranging from 21.7 years in Nagaland to 23.4 years in Manipur. States like Sikkim, Mizoram, and Manipur have relatively higher mean ages at marriage, while Nagaland and Tripura show lower averages. This data can be useful for understanding social trends, demographic differences, and potential regional influences on marriage patterns in India.



### ❖ ***CUSTOMS & TABOOS***

In Northeast India, women hold central roles in tribal traditions, cultural ceremonies, and family rituals. In matrilineal societies like the Khasi of Meghalaya, inheritance passes through the youngest daughter, reflecting women's strong societal influence. Customs often include taboos like restrictions during menstruation or male-dominated activities. Traditional attire like mekhela, chador or *phanek*, is important, with deviations seen as disrespectful in conservative settings (Oloo et al.,2013).

### ❖ ***RELIGIOUS BELIEFS***

In Northeast India, women's religious beliefs are diverse, encompassing Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and indigenous tribal practices. Tribal women often follow animistic and nature-based faiths, worshiping natural elements and ancestors. Christian women in Nagaland and Mizoram actively participate in church activities. Across all communities, women blend spiritual practices with traditional values, emphasizing family, community, and respect for nature.(Oloo et al.,2013).

## **SUGGESTIONS**

- **Awareness Campaigns:** Encourage communities to prioritize education for girls, particularly in areas with lower literacy rates, by conducting awareness campaigns.
- **Skill Development:** Focus on vocational education and training to empower young women for the job market, especially in rural and tribal areas with better infrastructure.
- **Political Representation:** Encourage more women to participate in politics and governance by offering leadership training programs.
- **Support Networks:** Strengthen local women's organizations and self-help groups to provide women with a platform for collective action and social change.
- **Strict Law Enforcement:** Improve the implementation of laws that protect women from violence and ensure that perpetrators are held accountable.
- **Cultural Preservation & Gender Equality:** Encourage cultural practices that promote gender equality while preserving the rich traditions of indigenous communities. Promote the idea that tradition can evolve to reflect modern values of equality and respect for women.





## CONCLUSION

The status of women in Northeast India is marked by improved education and health, with higher literacy rates and better healthcare access, though challenges persist in remote areas. Women enjoy greater social autonomy, especially in matrilineal societies like Meghalaya, participating in governance and community affairs. However, gender-based violence, economic inequality, and patriarchal norms hinder full empowerment. A growing movement for gender equality and women's rights is underway.

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