

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN A RURAL MATRILINEAL SOCIETY OF MEGHALAYA, INDIA

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Abstract: The present study was undertaken to ascertain whether rural women are empowered in a matrilineal society in India. In a state where traditional institutions function on the basis of local customs and conventions that are not codified and yet religiously followed, it is questionable to whether the women are essentially empowered. In such a scenario, one wonders if owning land is enough to empower a woman. The objective of this study is to check if whether land ownership empowers a woman and if it gives her decision-making power in the household. The study was conducted at one village from each of the two districts in Meghalaya- the East Khasi Hills and the West Khasi Hills. Fifty female respondents from each district were made to answer a structured questionnaire, after which four respondents had to be eliminated, as they were unmarried and eighteen respondents had to be dropped as they were either a widow or separated. Probit regression was then used to analyze the data. The results stated that women who inherited land were more likely to have a savings account and be a part of a socio-economic group. From this it can be concluded, that women who owned land through lineage were empowered, however the fact that they still consider their husbands to be the head of the family, makes us consider that there may be a psychological component to it.

Keywords: Meghalaya; Matrilineal Society; Women Empowerment

1. Introduction

In a fast-developing nation like India, the empowerment of women and the reduction of gender inequalities comprise a major part of the development policy. Gender equality is one of the 17 Global Goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development of India (UNDP, 2015).

Land is a major indicator of an individual's social status (Ghosh and Chowdhury, 2009). Like a landlord or a capitalist, the patriarch typically owned and controlled the means of production, and could impose economic sanctions on his agents, or workers. He had a legal claim on the labor and income of his wife and children and was required by law to provide them, in return, with a subsistence income (Braunstein and Folbre, 2001). Consequently, women tend to become economically dependent on their male counterparts, leading to a reduction in the empowerment quotient (Giovarelli and Wamalwa, 2011). Entitling women with land could on the one hand empower them economically, and on the other hand strengthen their ability to challenge social and political gender inequalities, both within and outside the home (Agarwal, 2000). Empowerment is a process, that expands women's agency

or, more simply put, it is an increase in women's ability to make choices about their lives and environment (Malhotra & Schuler, 2005). Based on this understanding of empowerment, land ownership should act as a source of empowerment by increasing women's security and influence and increasing their control over household decisions (Agarwal, 1997; Haddad, Hoddinott & Alderman, 1997).

Twenty-one of the 63 countries studied by Htun and Weldon (2011) have unequal inheritance rights for men and women. There is a bidirectional relationship between economic development and women's empowerment defined as improving the ability of women to access the constituents of development-in particular health, education, earning opportunities, rights, and political participation (Duflo, 2012). Women in Gujarat who participated in a loan program which insisted on joint legal titles for the husband and wife on land said that they gained security from the joint title, in that the family would not expel them from the household, nor sell the land without their permission (Unni, 1999). Similarly, in Rajasthan, it was found that widows who owned land were given greater respect and consideration than widows who did not (Agarwal, 1994).

Matriliny is an uncommon but a recurrent type of social organization found in the world. In the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample, 31 of 186 societies (17%) are matrilineal (Murdock & White, 1969). In India, the basic units of society are patrilineal in nature, with very few exceptions. Meghalaya and Kerala are two states in India where matriliney is known to be practised. While various studies concerning women's issues in patrilineal societies can be found (Kurian, 2004; Kulwika, 2002) or Kerala (Mitra and Singh, 2007; Chacko, 2003; Jeffrey, 2005) with very little research being done on the matrilineal society in Meghalaya, the following research area was chosen.

Meghalaya is one of the seven states in the northeast region and one of the smallest in India. It is a strip of land surrounded by Bangladesh to the south and part of the west and Assam to the north and the east. The state has a predominantly agrarian economy with around 75% of its total population being engaged in agricultural activities.

The Khasi people form a major part of the population in the eastern part of Meghalaya and are the state's largest community. While almost 85% of the Khasi population have embraced Christianity, a minority still follow and practice their old age indigenous religion, known as the 'KaNiem Khasi' (Gurdon, 1904).

One of the most remarkable features of the Khasis that sets them apart from other tribes is that descendants trace their lineage through their mothers and not their fathers. In other words, the Khasi follow a unilineal principle of matrilineal descent (Nongkynrih, 2002). According to Khasi laws and traditions, the woman and her youngest daughter inherit property, and not the man. Women are free to choose their husbands and there are no societal pressures for marriage as opposed to a society in a patrilineal framework. Women also have the right to end the marriage without any objection from their husbands. While remarriage among women is more of a taboo in a patrilineal society, it is more of a usual activity among the Khasi women. Men and women are both free to remarry as many times as they wish to, in Khasi society.

After marriage, the eldest daughter moves out of her mother's house along with her husband to set up an independent residence. In such a situation, the '*Shnong*' or the village administration provides the young couple with land for which there will be no ownership rights. Such a system of acquiring land is known as '*Ri Raid*', while land acquired through lineage by the youngest daughter in the family is known as '*Ri Kynti*'. However, land received by the *Shnong* is limited to the receiver's usage alone.

This land received by the *Shnong* is then passed on from generation to generation following the true khasi matrilineal tradition. In the case of the demise of the couple, the land will be returned to the *Shnong*, under the circumstances of the absence of an heir. In case of marriage to the youngest daughter, it is the man who moves in with his wife's family.

With the youngest daughter being the sole heir to the inheritance, the elder daughters find it difficult to access bank loans as they have no valid legal documents to provide as collateral. In fact, even in the case of the youngest daughter, their husband or even brothers/uncles decide the use of the property like the agricultural land (Mukhim, 2008). While many families religiously follow the tradition of the youngest daughter inheriting ancestral property, with modernization, several families have also begun to desire to exercise the option of distributing land among children equally. However, this practice is still rare.

2. Methodology

In September 2016, a questionnaire survey was conducted for 28 days in Meghalaya. The research was conducted in two districts, East Khasi Hills and West Khasi Hills. Mawtawar (Village A) and Nongthliew (Village B) were the two research sites chosen because a majority of the residents were engaged in agricultural activities, similar to other typical rural communities. Mawtawar is a village situated in the district of East Khasi Hills, 15 kms from the city center, with a population of around 980 households, while Nongthliew is a village situated in the district of West Khasi Hills, 38kms from the city center with a population of around 172 households. The distance between the two villages is around 58kms.

Fifty female respondents were chosen at random from each village. The data of four respondents had to be eliminated, as they were unmarried and in addition 18 respondents had to be dropped as they were either widowed or separated, as it is difficult to check empowerment status unless they have a husband. The respondents had to be females engaged in agricultural activities. Each questionnaire was filled on a one-to-one basis. The respondents had to answer a questionnaire on the socio-economic characteristics of their household, such as information on family members, income, head of the family, and decision-making skills. The respondents were also questioned based on whether they had a savings account with a microfinance institution and if whether it was a joint account with their spouse or not. The questionnaire also covered their participation in a socio-economic group.

Jejeenhoy's (1997) study, explores the effects of a range of variables on women's autonomy. Measures of women's autonomy included their role in decision-making; mobility; incidence of domestic violence; access to, and control over, economic resources. For this research, the respondent's participation in a socio-economic group and her having a saving's account were chosen to check if she has decision making powers in the household and if she is empowered.

Social empowerment also includes the extent of freedom a woman has to participate in various social affairs, such as attending functions or meetings on community development-related matters even outside their own village (Ghosh and Chowdhury, 2009). A socio-economic group can empower a woman economically, socially, physically, and mentally. Such a group is a small homogenous affinity group of the rural poor who have volunteered to organize themselves into a group for eradication of poverty for their members (Dash, 2013). Women's participation in microcredit programs helps to increase women's empowerment. It is seen that there is a positive impact of women having a micro-savings account on both household decision-making power and self-perception of savings behavior (Ashraf and Yin,

2009). To examine the empowerment status of women of the two areas, the following variables were regressed.

A probit estimation is applied to the following equation:

$$\text{Socio-economic group} = \beta_{10} + \beta_{11}\text{Household Characteristics} + \beta_{12}\text{Empowerment Factors} + v \quad (1)$$

Similarly, a probit estimation is applied to the following equation as well:

$$\text{Savings Account} = \beta_{20} + \beta_{21}\text{Household Characteristics} + \beta_{22}\text{Empowerment Factors} + v_2 \quad (2)$$

3. Result and Discussion

3.1. Sample Characteristics

From Table 1, the following deductions can be made; most of the Khasi women agreed with the fact that the girls in their community were more educated in comparison to the opposite gender. One of the major reasons being that the boys were required to help the family on the fields. In rural areas, children spending time in schools is considered to be time lost in economic sustainability of the family. According to statistics presented by NFHS (2009) of India, for 1081 girls around 1000 boys attended school between the age groups of 6-17. A government school at Nongthliew provides free education till class 5 for both genders. Along with this, the school also provides mid-day meals to the students. The staff including the teachers were women.

Table 1. Characteristics of Sample Household

Characteristics	Unit	A	B	Total
Age	Years	40.76	41.36	42.91
Spousal Age	Years	45.30	43.19	44.29
Education	Years	6.74	8.19	7.44
Spousal Education	Years	6.79	5.36	6.10
Second Marriage	Years	11.62	5.71	9.2
Spousal second marriage	Years	16.27	14.28	15.38
Age at marriage of woman	Years	19.88	21.21	20.59
Percentage of Girls	%	47.74	46.65	47.20
Land (Ri kynti)	%	81.39	100	90.69
Socio-economic group	%	13.3	43.1	28.2
Savings Account	%	65	100	82.5
Sample Size		43	35	78

Source: Own Survey, 2016

It is seen that adults who are educated are more likely to get their children educated (NFHS,2009). It was observed that 13.3% of the women in Village A and 43.1% of the women in Village B, were a part of a socio-economic group. 65% of the women in Village A had a savings account, while it was observed that every respondent in Village B had a savings account. It was also seen that all the respondents of Village B inherited land through lineage (*Ri kynti*), while 65% of the respondents from Village A inherited land through lineage. Most of the women

who participated in socio economic activities were from West Khasi Hills as well as majority of the women who owned land through *Ri kynti* were also found to be from the same district.

3.2. Determinants of Empowerment Status

The household characteristics as well as the empowerment and economic factors used in the probit models are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive Status of the Explanatory Variables

Variables	Unit	Description	Mean	St.Dev
Dependent variables				
Socio-economic group	Dummy	Take 1, if she is a part of Socio-economic activity	0.28	0.45
Savings Account	Dummy	Take 1, if the female respondent has a Savings Account	0.84	0.36
Household Characteristics				
Age	Years	Age of the female respondent	41.05	11.52
Spousal Age	Years	Age of the male respondent	44.29	12.59
Educational Qualification	Years	Years of schooling of female respondent	7.44	4.4
Spousal Educational Qualification	Years	Years of schooling of husband	6.10	2.85
Second Marriage	Dummy	Take 1, if female respondent married again	0.08	0.27
Spousal Second Marriage	Dummy	Take 1, if male respondent married again	0.17	0.38
Age at Marriage of Woman	Years	Age at marriage of female respondent	20.23	3.15
Percentage of Girls	%	Percentage of Girls in the Household	47.37	17.22
Empowerment Factors				
Land Ri Kynti	Dummy	Take 1, if the female respondent owns land	0.56	0.49

Note 1) Sample Size:78

Source: Own Survey, 2016

Table 3 shows the results of our estimation. It shows the relationships of female respondent's participation in socio-economic activities and having a savings account with the other possible functions.

The positive effect of *Ri kynti* on socio-economic group means that women who inherit land through lineage and own it are more likely to join a socio-economic group. Participating in social economic activities gives much power to a woman in a society.

It was also seen that there was a positive effect of *Ri kynti* on savings account. Land is the only or major asset of the rural women that they can use as collateral security in acquiring bank loans (Toro, 2016). This explains the positive relation of land received by the woman through inheritance (*Ri kynti*) and her having a savings account

Other than this, two other significant factors shown in the result were that of the negative impact of husband's educational qualification on both socio-economic group and savings account. This means that higher the educational qualification of the husband, the less likely for the woman to join a socio-economic group and have a savings account. From this we can deduce, that women tend to have less freedom and choices if the educational level of their husband is higher than theirs.

Table 3. Probit Analysis of Socio-economic group and Savings Account

Variables	Socio-economic Group		Savings Account	
	β	P> z	β	P> z
Age	0.03	0.54	-0.09	0.09*
Spousal Age	-0.03	0.51	0.04	0.46
Educational Qualification	0.01	0.66	0.00	0.90
Spousal Educational Qualification	-0.10	0.09*	-0.12	0.09*
Second Marriage	-0.79	0.30	-0.83	0.14
Spousal Second Marriage	0.26	0.65	-0.53	0.41
Age at marriage of woman	-0.04	0.38	0.00	0.89
Percentage of Girls	0.18	0.11	0.19	0.17
Ri kynti	0.90	0.02**	0.79	0.01**
Pseudo R2	0.15		0.24	
Correctly Classified	76%		85.3%	

Note: 1) ***, **, * indicates significances 1%, 5% and 10% levels respectively

2) Sample survey =78, Own Survey,2016

Source: Author's Estimation

Along with this, the negative impact of a women's age on saving's account, means that older women tend to not have a saving's account, giving the impression that they may not be acquainted well with owning one or that they find the procedure of opening an account with a microfinance institution complicated.

Other than these factors, from the results it can also be seen that a spousal's age, second marriage of the wife, second marriage of the husband, age at marriage of the wife, educational qualification of the wife, educational qualification of the husband and the percentage of girls in the family had no significance.

4. Conclusion

In summary, to check whether land ownership of women empowers them and if whether it gives them decision making power in the household in a matrilineal society, we can conclude from our findings that the women who owned land through *Ri kynti* were empowered. However, in a Khasi society women's customary rights over land continues to mainly be limited to that of a custodian, which still gives them a certain amount of bargaining power. From the survey conducted, women may be more empowered when they receive land through their lineage (*Ri kynti*) in contrast to the ones who received land through the *Shnong* (*Ri raid*). However, the fact that they still consider their husband to be the head of the family, makes us consider that there may be a psychological component to it.

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