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# Women's Participation and Decision-Making Process in the Village: A Study in Zunheboto District, Nagaland

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## ABSTRACT

India is concerned about women empowerment. Several studies stated that women are lagging behind in terms of their participation and decision making process. To tackle such issues, India is now moving forward with women reservation systems. In Nagaland state, women are also participating in village development board. To know more about women positions in Naga society, this exploratory study was designed in Asukhomi village, Zunheboto district, Nagaland. Three case studies were taken into consideration along with one focus group discussion. Majority of the respondents were females (52.6%). More than 20% of respondents were illiterate. In Village Development Board, (VDB), there were three women representatives and 25% reservation was being followed. Close to 95.0% respondents expressed the need of women's participation for proper decision making process. Majority of the respondents (n=16; 84.2%) expressed that women were working for Village Council development. About 90% of respondents stated that women are also working for Self Help Groups (SHGs) and they have proper spouse and family support. VDB leaders are also encouraging women to come forward to take initiatives for overall

development of the village. One women leader expressed that earlier days were troublesome because of the patriarchal pattern of management but gradually systems were changed. Women need to be active to change such prevailing systems in the society. Women should show their leadership quality. Overall, it was seen that the women have a platform for participation in the village and women should come forward to use their stage for the development of entire village.

**Keywords:** Decision Making; Empowerment; Participation; VDB; Village Council.

## Introduction

Village Councils are an important component of the modern governance system in Nagaland. The district planning and development boards are important and holistic approach towards development and at the same time linkages to the grassroots through Village Development Board (VDB) is also important in the arena of rural community development. These linkages have become vital for decentralizing governance and decision-making process in the post-independence and statehood (Humtsoe, 2013).

The role of Village Council assumes very significance. Village Council is the overall authority for the administration of justice within the village. Under the Nagaland Village and Area Council Act, 1978, every recognized village should have their own Village Council. Village Council also cares and provides preventive measures during an outbreak of any infection or any kind of public health issues. Council have full power to deal with the internal administration of the village, maintenance of law and order, enforce order passed by competent authority, etc.

Village Development Board (VDB) is a statutory body functioning under the primary village authority known as Village Council. VDB was first setup in 1976 in Ketsapomi village in Phek district, Nagaland on an

experimental basis. After observing success of Ketsopomi VDB, a mass campaign was launched in 1980s to expand the coverage of VDB in other villages of Nagaland. VDB are involved in all phases of developmental activities include receipt of allocation of funds, selection of beneficiaries or schemes, monitoring of progress of works and expenditure and completion of different schemes. Grants are available in all 1083 recognized villages through the VDB, Nagaland.

India's population was accounted for 121.06 cores and the females constituted 48.5% of it (Census, 2011). Female sex ratio was 943 per 1000 males. As per National Sample Survey (2011-12) the female headed household percentages in rural and urban areas were respectively 11.5% and 12.4%. In the year 2016, women ministers constituted 12% in Central Council of Ministers (9 out of 75). In the 16th Lok Sabha, 12% of the total members were women (64 out of 534). In 2016, 46% of the elected representatives in Panchayati Raj Institutions were women in India.

Women's participation and roles in Panchayati Raj Institutions and in politics are mentioned in different committee reports and bills in India from time to time such as the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee Report of 1957, the Women's Status Committee Report of 1974, the Asoke Mehta Committee of 1978, the National Perspective Plan for Women 1988, the 64th Constitution Amendment Bill of 1989, the Constitution (108<sup>th</sup> Amendment) Bill 2008, etc. All these committees have given effort to enhance women's position in village development system. Bills were concerned about reservation of women's seats and the last bill was proposed for 33% women reservations in Lok Sabha in the year 2008.

The Hindu civilization are the most known civilization has shown much important in the status of the women, the high honour position has also been approved during the Vedic period and the Rig Veda the primary source of Hinduism has the substantiation of women seers and

chanters of hymn. There were no such limitations to attend the high knowledge of God (Degi, 2009). Northeast India is known for its ethno-cultural diversities and has certain impacts on gender role and status. Since ages, the women of northeast India have shared a significant social space as compared to most of their contemporaries living in other parts of the Indian sub-continent. Their commendable participation in, and contribution to the social, cultural, economic and political affairs of the state have not received the recognition, they deserve. Such as: in Assam, the tea tribewomen folks are considered the perfect tea leaf pluckers. Khasi tribes of Meghalaya are well known for matriarchal society in north-eastern region (Kakoty, 2012-2016). Another study from Nagaland stated that, Naga society does not have any caste unlike other society in India but there is social distinction between men and the women and their roles, position and status. Women are discriminated, no female member has the right to inherit the property of parents, not only that women are also ignored in decision making body such as Village Assembly, Village Council, Citizen Forum etc. Women are deprived in highest decision making (Imtisungba, 2009).

To understand that status of women in village development measures, this study was carried out in Asukhomi village, Zunheboto district, Nagaland. The total population of this village is 1406, male and female population percentages are respectively 51% (n=711) and 49% (n=695). All people belong to schedule tribes. There are 290 households in the village and an average 5 persons live in every family. The objectives of this study are as follows -

1. To understand the functions and relationship status of Village Development Board with Village Council, and
2. To understand the scope of women in decision making process in Village Development Board and Village Council.

## Methodology

This exploratory research followed mixed methodology. To carry out this research, 19 respondents were interacted (for quantitative data) followed by three case studies and one Focus Group Discussion (for qualitative data) in the year 2018. Both primary and secondary sources of data were used for data collection. Primary data was collected from Asukhomi village and the secondary data was collected from the sources of books and journal articles. This study followed interview schedules along with both open ended and closed ended questions. Quantitative data were analysed in tables and diagrams, case studies were discussed in detailed manner. Informed consent was taken from the respondents and to hide respondent's identity, strict confidentiality was maintained.

## Results

Functions and relationships status of Village Development Board with Village Council

In this study, majority of the respondents (n=10; 52.6%) were females followed by males (n=9; 47.4%). More than one third of the respondents (n=7; 36.8%) belong to age group of 51 - 60 years followed by 71 years & more (n=6; 31.6%), 61 - 70 years (n=4; 21.1%), and 40 - 45 years (n=2, 10.5%). Majority of respondents (n=11; 57.9%) were studied below metric levels followed by illiterates (n=4; 21.1%), matriculates (n=3; 15.8%), and graduates (n=1; 5.3%).

All the respondents stated that, Village Council is the sole decision making body in the village and that constitutes a total of 13 members. They stated that there are 10 members in Village Development Board and the board is working for the development of the village. Majority of respondents (n=13; 68.4%) stated that, council members provide immediate intervention to settle any disputes/problems followed by intervention from the churches (n=3; 15.8%), Gaon Burahs (n=2; 10.5%) and elders

(n=1; 5.3%). However, all the respondents stated that council is much effective to resolve any issues in the village. All respondents stated that, Village Development Board is accountable to Village Council.

Majority of the respondents (n=12, 63.2%) had a good relation with the council followed by very good relationship (n=5, 26.3%) and not such relationship (n=2, 10.5%). Almost three quarter of respondents (n=14; 73.7%) stated no any misunderstanding between VDB and Village Council and only 26.3% (n=05) expressed few misunderstandings. Majority of respondents (n=17; 89.5%) expressed about good communication between Village Council and VDB and only 10.5% (n=2) of the respondents stated very good communication. Most of the respondents (n=09; 48.1%) agreed that, consent was received by council from VDB while taking decisions followed by 36.1% (n=07) who disagreed, and upto some extent (n=03; 15.8%). However, majority of the respondents (n=13; 68.4%) stated that Village Council does not hold consultation meeting with VDB whenever any village level decisions are to be made.

#### Scope of Women in Decision Making Process

Majority of the respondents (n=18; 94.7%) stated that, women's participation is required for good decision making process and only one respondent said that women should be involved as per demand. Majority of respondents (n=16; 84.2%) expressed that women were working for the development of council and village.

In this study, majority of respondents (n=17; 89.5%) stated about women representation in Self-Help Groups and only 10.5% (n=2) of respondents denied that. As per as the respondents, most of the women gets support from their husband which indicates women folk is living a dignified life. Majority (n=17; 89.4%) of the women folks were able to make decision in their own family. As per women folk (n=07; 58.3%) good behaviour is a key



component for decision making process. Majority of the respondent (n=18; 94.7%) were aware about 25% women reservation whereas 5.3%(n=1) of the respondent was unaware of the women reservation. The decision-making process and impact to the village are shown in table 1.

**Table 1: Distribution of Decision-Making Process and its Impact in the Community**

Areas of Decision-Making Process of Women and its Impact in the Community	No. of the Respondents (%)
Active participation in social activities.	03(15.7%)
Ability to stay flexible in work.	06(31.5%)
Encouraging women's leadership in community.	05 (20.3%)
Being courageous with remarkable behavior.	02 (10.5%)
Ability to adjust within the family and community.	03(15.7%)
They maintain decorum of the village	05 (26.3%)
Bring change by enforcing the laws	04 (21.0%)
They can stop people from doing illegal act	03 (15.7%)
Keep the village clean and hygienic	03 (15.7%)
Women can build good relationship both internally and externally.	04(21.0%)

### Summary Result of Three Case Studies

First case study was done with a woman leader who was born and brought up in Asukhomi village. In the year 1983 to till 1984, she volunteered in Village Development Board (VDB) as a secretary followed by chair person in the women society for 12 years. She gave her active leadership in Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA) project across Zunheboto area. She was president of Asukhomi Sumi TotimiHoho and currently serving as a president of Sumi TotimiHoho (STH) Zunheboto. In 1984, she received a ransom award in the state during a VDB and Council joint meeting at Kohima, Nagaland. She received that award because of her intellectual competency and dedication towards her work. Maintaining the post of Secretary of VDB was troublesome for her because of prevalence of the traditional practices of patriarchy system. One day regional joint director came to the office for a meeting. She was absent to attend that meeting as she was given kitchen-based

work in the office. Most of the time she was given such type of tasks to accomplish in the office premise. When meeting was over, she met the regional joint director and politely raised few questions - Is there any way for the women to be a part in a meeting? Is there any other place for women rather than kitchen? The regional joint director replied, you don't keep yourself in the kitchen as you have other roles to play for village development. Since then, the 25% reservation for women reached in Asukhomi village. Asukhomi village is the first village in Sumi history in Nagaland to adapt the provisions provided by the constitution of India. That's the reason she had receive an award in a joint meeting conference at Kohima. That was a stepping stone for her to explore more. She went to Imphal to collect loom resources as an exposure learning. She also attended skill-based training programmes in Mokokchung and Kohima Districts. Gradually, she started sharing her skills to the other village women and initiated education and training programmes on looming, knitting, sewing, etc. She became instructor for all these women development programmes in the village. Thereafter, she started taking leadership roles in the village development board. At the initial stage she underwent hardships in taking the role of leadership but gradually things started changing. She worked tirelessly by carrying the criticisms on her shoulder to make a benchmark in the village and in the society at large. She expressed that, exposure visits help the person to grow mentally and it enriches spiritually because as a Christian and a believer everything is laid in the hands of God.

In second case study, the male leader stated that 25% women reservation was accepted by Village Council in the year 2016 that women can also be a member of Village Council. Since then, Sumi Totimi Hoho (STH) started demanding for their 25% share in the Village Council. Respondent stated that, the women were unable to follow up in the meetings like male representatives. Women

fails to turn up because of their family responsibilities. He also encourages women those who are capable of delivering humanitarian services.

In third case study, the male leader stated that under the MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) scheme, employment and wages were provided to the villager those who had their job card. Under the Grant-in-Aid, there were categories such as general, share for women, and share for youth. Funds were provided by the government under each category.

Earlier there was a separate body called women VDB and the function of that body was to get the women share under Grant-in-Aid scheme but now women showed less interest in getting their share. Both VDB and Village Council are trying to activate a permanent women VDB body in the village by which they can get a financial help through these schemes.

### Summary Result of Focus Group Discussion

15 people were there in the discussion. The results of their discussion are showing below -

- Women can be a part of decision-making process through active participation in social activities. They need to maintain flexibility in their work within the family and with the community. Women leadership was encouraged.
- Women can maintain the decorum of the village by enforcing the law to stop people doing wrong and illegal activities in the village. They can keep the village clean and hygienic.
- Women can build good relationship within the village and outside through promoting the culture of peace in every decision that council make.

## Discussions

In a village, the decision-making body is Village Council. Council consists of ten male members which includes three Goanburah's and seven other members from the society. In any issues related to village, interventions of Village Council are very effective in tackling such issues. On the other hand, the Village Development Board takes part in various decision making process. Their duty is to ensure that government schemes and grants are reaching to the villagers or not. VDB is accountable before the Village Council. Women are involved in VDB as members and in Asukhomi village there are 3 women VDB members which shows 25% women reservation status has been maintained in the village.

In this study, few respondents stated that women are busy in their household works and so, they are not able to give proper attention in village decision making processes. A study (Jamir, 2012) stated that, the early 20th century saw the birth of women's organization and the beginning of the demand for political rights. After independence when the Constitution pledged the nation to the principles of equality and dignity of the individual and proclaimed the fundamental right of women to political and legal equality and guaranteed non-discrimination in employment in office under the state. But the voice is actually a poor yardstick to judge the emancipation of women. In order to provide greater opportunities to women to actively participate in the decision-making process at the grass-root level, the Government passed the 73rd Amendment act which talks about one third of seats in local bodies. In most societies there are widely held belief that women lack intelligence, are psychologically weak, emotionally unbalance, illogical and unreliable.

India government already discussed about 33% women reservation system and in this present study it was noticed that already 25% women reservation were granted by

Village Council. So, Village Council already created a venture for women to come and participate. In the first case study, lady explained the hardship that she had crossed and raised her voice of existing partialities. She was able to succeed because of her strong determination and good leadership qualities. Family and society should support women for participation in different developmental activities and in this study, it was also noticed that most of the husbands are cooperative and majority of the families are supporting women to represent in developmental activities. Majority of women are also working independently for their self-help group. SHG implies that women have equal capacity and equal power to run an institution. These are the positive indicators. The male leader from third case study mentioned that women showed less interest to take their active part because of other responsibilities. So, here the family members and leaders should motivate the women folk to participate. Focus group discussion encouraged the women folk by stating that women can protect the community and society by ensuring the legal perspective in more precise ways. Women can maintain relationship for the wellness of the village. Altogether, women are able to take their decisions in a well-directed manner for their family, community, and society. *Nagaland is a safe place for women and in this context the male counterparts need to look into the equality and respect measures.*

### Suggestions

1. Village Council structure needs to be maintained in accordance with the local self-governance system by involving women representatives even though women cannot give their ample of time due to their family concern.
2. The role of the VDB needs to be strengthened by enhancing them to make the best decisions and planning. VDB members should encourage women's

- participation and their representations towards holistic development.
3. The labour of women needs to be respected equally because women are capable to run the primary institution (i.e., family) in the society.
  4. Empowerment needs to be generated to the micro-level, meso-level and macro-level of the community. The women empowerment should not be restricted only in the family level and this should spread to the communities and national level. In India, the modern socio-economic and political system are encouraging these core groups of people to come forward and take necessary steps for developmental perspective.

### Conclusion

Village Councils are an important component in Nagaland state as Council is the overall authority for the administration of justice within the village. Council also provides preventive measures during an outbreak of any infection or any kind of public health issues. Council have full power to deal with the internal administration of the village, maintenance of law and order, enforce order passed by competent authority, etc. Village Development Board is a statutory body, functioning under the primary village authority known as Village Council. India government has concerned about 33% reservations of women in Panchyati Raj system. In Asukhomi village 25% seats are reserved of women in Village Development Board. Spouse and other family members are very cooperative for these women to take their own leadership for the development perspective of the village. The contemporary world is moving toward gender based equal justice and treatment. Male leaders should give chance to women by which they can show their creativity and productivity towards holistic development. In Asukhomi village, women were given opportunity instead of their household and family based work. Villager were

concerned about the utilisation of MGNREGA funds by the women group as fund is allotted for women. They insisted women to come forward. Villages will automatically develop if male counterparts insist females to come forward and work hand in hand to make this a real picture of development. But women are lagging behind in terms of their participation and decision making process in several corners and work only limited to own houses. In the past, Asukhomi village women came across certain issues related to patriarchy system but in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, male leaders are making platform for the women by ensuring their rights, participation, and decision making. A village or a state or a nation will reach to upmost development when women would be given opportunity in participation and decision making.

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