

Women's Representation in Village Councils of East Khasi Hills and Their Decision-Making Roles.

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Abstract

This study investigates the profound disconnect between the high social standing of women in the Khasi matrilineal society and their limited participation and decision-making authority within the Dorbar Shnong (traditional village council) institutions in Meghalaya, India. Operating under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, the Dorbar Shnong functions as the primary grassroots governance body, but its customary laws and political structure are predominantly male-centric. Employing a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative surveys of participation rates and qualitative interviews with community leaders, the research aims to assess the actual level of women's involvement, ranging from attendance to holding executive roles. The central hypothesis is that traditional political norms and interpretations of customary law override the tenets of matriliney in the public domain, leading to tokenistic inclusion rather than substantive empowerment. Findings are expected to provide empirical evidence detailing the socio-cultural, institutional, and legal barriers faced by women, culminating in targeted policy recommendations for the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC) to promote inclusive and equitable local governance.

Keywords: Women's Representation, Decision-Making Power, Dorbar Shnong, Khasi Matriliney, Gender and Governance, Traditional Institutions, Substantive Participation, Meghalaya.

1. Introduction

The study of grassroots democracy in India's Northeast presents a unique paradox, particularly in Meghalaya, home to the Khasi tribe. The Khasi society is globally recognized for its matrilineal system, where women are custodians of property and lineage is traced through the mother, endowing them with considerable social status and economic security. In contrast, the region's traditional political institutions, such as the Dorbar Shnong (village council), have historically been the exclusive domain of men.

The Dorbar Shnong is the bedrock of local administration, justice, and community development. While the rest of India has seen mandatory reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) through constitutional amendments, the Sixth Schedule protects the customary laws of tribal bodies like the Dorbar Shnong, which often inherently exclude women from formal leadership. This research seeks to rigorously

analyze this fundamental contradiction: How does a society that places women at the centre of its social structure systematically exclude them from its political and administrative core? Understanding the mechanisms of this exclusion is vital for achieving comprehensive gender justice and true participatory governance.

Background of the Dorbar Shnong and Governance Context

The Dorbar Shnong is an ancient democratic institution led by the Rangbah Shnong (Headman) and his Executive Dorbar. Its functions encompass land management, dispute resolution, maintenance of community assets, and enforcement of local social norms. Historically, participation in the *Dorbar Pyllun* (General Assembly) has been limited to adult male householders. Over the past two decades, influenced by modernisation, education, and advocacy by women's groups, some Dorbars have nominally allowed women's participation. However, these changes often remain superficial, with women's roles confined to peripheral committees or general attendance, without access to core power structures (the Executive Dorbar) responsible for financial and legal decisions. The Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC) regulates these bodies, yet the prevailing customary practice continues to favour male leadership.

Despite the cultural honour accorded to Khasi women under matriliney, their formal representation and substantive decision-making power in the Dorbar Shnong are critically low. This limited political agency is a significant democratic deficit at the grassroots level. This study aims to move beyond anecdotal observation to provide a systematic, data-driven analysis of this enduring political imbalance.

Literature Review

Women's representation in the traditional village councils and their roles in decision-making processes.

Agarwal (1994) provided one of the earliest and most influential frameworks for understanding gendered access to local resources and institutions in South Asia. Agarwal argued that formal rights (land, property) and customary practice can diverge: women may have social or economic standing in domestic or kinship spheres but still be excluded from political authority and public decision-making. Her distinction between access and control of resources remains analytically useful when investigating why matrilineal social systems do not automatically yield political power for women in local councils.

Chattopadhyay & Duflo (2004) produced seminal empirical evidence from India showing that institutional changes (reservation of seats for women) produce measurable effects on policy priorities and public goods. Their randomized/ quasi-experimental work demonstrated that increasing women's numerical presence in elected local bodies changed public spending priorities and altered women's political ambitions. Though their focus was statutory Panchayati Raj bodies rather than customary councils, the study established that formal institutional inclusion can shift outcomes — a finding relevant for debates on formalizing women's roles in traditional bodies like Dorbar Shnong. (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004).

Throughout the 2000s and early 2010s scholars working on Northeast India highlighted the matrilineal paradox — that matriliney does not equate to matriarchy. Ethnographic and interdisciplinary studies of Khasi society (cultural analyses and local histories) documented women’s centrality in kinship and household domains while simultaneously noting their absence or marginalization in formal political fora (various authors; see syntheses in regionspecific reviews). These studies emphasize culture-specific norms and customary law as key explanatory variables. (regional ethnographies, 2007–2014).

Local civil-society activism and reportage began to amplify the demand for women’s formal representation in traditional councils. Organizations such as Lympung Ki Seng Kynthei (a federation of women’s groups in East Khasi Hills) raised public demands and engaged KHADC (Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council) from the 2010s onward, documenting grassroots pressure for statutory and normative reform in Dorbar institutions (Lympung Ki Seng Kynthei; *The Shillong Times*, 2011). This activism set the groundwork for more sustained advocacy in the 2020s. (*The Shillong Times*, 2011).

By the late 2010s, regionally focused empirical work (e.g., Ellena, 2018) systematically described the coexistence of female social centrality and political marginality in Meghalaya. Ellena’s work emphasized that while Khasi women often lead in household and welfare activities, local decision-making in Dorbar Shnongs remained male-dominated, illustrating a structural gap between social status and political authority. These findings deepen the “matriliney without matriarchy” thesis and point to the need to study both presence and influence. (**Ellena, 2018**).

National and international syntheses in the 2010s–2020s (including UN Women summaries and policy reviews) consolidated evidence that numerical inclusion through quotas or policy reforms increases visibility but does not automatically secure substantive influence or outcomes without complementary measures (training, institutional redesign, normative change). These syntheses proposed multi-pronged interventions — legal mandates, capacity building, and community sensitization — as preconditions for substantive empowerment. (**UN Women, 2021**).

From 2022 onward, news reports and policy briefs documented intensified local campaigns in Meghalaya to include women in Dorbar executive committees. Regional media and local NGOs reported instances of Dorbar Shnongs experimenting with women’s inclusion, while other councils resisted, producing a patchwork of change across the state (*Highland Post*, *The Shillong Times*, *NENow*, 2023). This period therefore reflects contested, uneven reforms rather than uniform progress. (**Highland Post, 2023; The Shillong Times, 2023; NENow, 2023**).

Methodology

A mixed method of research design has been adopted to attain the objective of the study. The study is conducted in the East Khasi Hills District of Meghalaya, which consists of 11 Community and Rural Development (C&RD) Blocks. The district provides a suitable setting for the study because it reflects both traditional governance institutions and evolving trends in gender participation. For this research, Myllem Block is selected to represent both urban and rural contexts. From this block, a total of twelve villages are purposively selected based on accessibility, diversity, and the level of women’s involvement in the Darbar

Shnong. From the twelve villages, a total of one hundred twenty (120) respondents were randomly selected and surveyed through questionnaire to collect quantitative data. To collect quantitative data interview schedule was used. Data analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS software tools.

Demographic Profile of the Respondents

To achieve this objective, a mixed-methods research design was adopted, and data were collected using both a questionnaire and an interview schedule.

General and Socio-demographic Information

Table: Demographic Profile of the Respondents (N = 120)

<i>Demographic Variable</i>	<i>Categories</i>	<i>Frequency (N)</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
Age Group	20–30 years	57	47.5
	31–40 years	32	26.7
	41–50 years	10	8.3
	51–60 years	15	12.5
	61–70 years	6	5.0
Gender	Male	43	35.8
	Female	76	63.3
	Others	1	0.8
Marital Status	Married	55	45.8
	Unmarried	65	54.2
Educational Qualification	Illiterate	4	3.3
	Primary	9	7.5
	Secondary	13	10.8
	Higher Secondary	27	22.5
	Graduate	36	30.0
	Postgraduate	31	25.8
Occupation	Farmer	14	11.7
	Homemaker	11	9.2
	Daily Wage	11	9.2
	Earner		
	Teacher	20	16.7
	Bachelor (early employment)	29	24.2
	Student	34	28.3
	Government Employee	1	0.8
Monthly Household Income	Below ₹5,000	8	6.7
	₹5,000–10,000	10	8.3
	₹10,000–20,000	12	10.0
	Above ₹20,000	14	11.7

₹20,000–60,000	1	0.8
Prefer not to say	75	62.5

The age distribution of the respondents indicates that a majority belong to the younger and middle age categories. The gender distribution of respondents indicates that a majority were female (63.3%), followed by male (35.8%), while 0.8% identified as belonging to the other category. With respect to marital status, 54.2% of respondents were unmarried, whereas 45.8% were married. Education levels among respondents show that the majority had attained at least secondary-level education or above. Specifically, 30.0% were graduates, and 25.8% were postgraduates, followed by 22.5% with higher secondary education.

The occupational distribution reveals that the sample was diverse and representative of multiple sectors. Overall, the demographic profile presents a young, educated, and diverse group of respondents with balanced gender representation and varying socio-economic backgrounds. Such a distribution provides a sound base for understanding the dynamics of community participation, governance, and empowerment within the study context.

Results and Data Analysis

The following quantitative data were collected and analysed in SPSS to understand awareness and political representation of women, and social empowerment perception of community people

Section 1: Awareness and Political Representation

Table 9: Are Women Allowed to Attend Dorbar Shnong Meetings?

Are women allowed to attend Dorbar Shnong meetings?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Yes	110	91.7	91.7	91.7
Valid No	9	7.5	7.5	99.2
Valid 5.00	1	.8	.8	100.0
Total	120	100.0	100.0	

The data reveals that an overwhelming majority of respondents — 110 out of 120 (91.7%) — affirmed that women are allowed to attend Dorbar Shnong (village council) meetings. Only 9 respondents (7.5%) stated that women are not permitted to attend, while 1 respondent (0.8%) provided an invalid or unclear response (coded as “5.00”). This indicates a strong recognition of women’s formal inclusion in local governance spaces within the sampled communities.

From a critical perspective, these findings suggest a significant shift in the traditional gender norms that historically restricted women’s presence in Dorbar Shnong meetings, especially within the matrilineal yet male-dominated context of Meghalaya’s Khasi society. The high affirmative percentage (over 90%) may reflect progressive social awareness, increased advocacy for gender inclusivity, and the influence of legal and policy frameworks promoting women’s participation in grassroots governance. However, the small

percentage (7.5%) reporting exclusion indicates that certain villages or traditional bodies may still adhere to restrictive customary norms, reflecting uneven progress across communities.

Overall, while the data demonstrates a positive trend toward gender inclusiveness in community meetings, critical reflection suggests that mere permission to attend does not necessarily equate to effective participation or influence. The next stages of analysis—examining women’s active roles, speaking opportunities, and leadership involvement—will be essential to understanding whether this formal inclusion translates into substantive empowerment and decision-making power.

Table 10: Are There Any Women Holding Positions (Executive/Member) in Your Dorbar Shnong?

Are there any women holding positions (executive/member) in your Dorbar Shnong?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	103	85.8	85.8	85.8
Valid No	17	14.2	14.2	100.0
Total	120	100.0	100.0	

The data shows that a substantial majority of respondents — 103 out of 120 (85.8%) — reported that there are women who hold positions either as executive members or ordinary members in their respective Dorbar Shnongs. In contrast, 17 respondents (14.2%) stated that no women occupy such positions. This finding clearly indicates that women’s participation in formal roles within traditional village councils has gained significant acceptance in most of the communities studied.

From a critical standpoint, this result reflects a gradual yet meaningful transformation in the traditional power structures of the Dorbar Shnong, which historically restricted leadership and membership to men despite the matrilineal kinship system prevalent among the Khasi and Jaintia communities of Meghalaya. The high percentage of affirmative responses (85.8%) suggests that efforts to mainstream gender inclusion—whether through local awareness, NGO interventions, or evolving social attitudes—are showing tangible outcomes. It also signifies that women are not merely observers but are increasingly occupying institutional roles in local governance mechanisms.

However, the 14.2% of respondents who reported the absence of women in such positions cannot be overlooked. This minority still represents pockets of resistance or slower change, possibly rooted in traditional norms or lack of educational and leadership opportunities for women. Furthermore, the presence of women in executive or membership roles does not automatically imply that they exercise substantial influence; their participation may, in some contexts, remain symbolic or consultative rather than authoritative.

In conclusion, the data underscores a promising movement toward gender inclusivity in traditional

governance structures. Yet, for this inclusion to translate into genuine empowerment, future analysis must examine the nature and extent of women's decision-making power within these Dorbar Shnongs, not just their numerical presence.

Table 11: If Yes, How Many Women Members Are There Approximately?

If yes, how many women members are there approximately?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
1 – 2	1	.8	.8	.8
3 – 5	1	.8	.8	1.7
Valid More than 5	118	98.3	98.3	100.0
Total	120	100.0	100.0	

The data indicates that an overwhelming majority of respondents — 118 out of 120 (98.3%) — reported that there are more than five women members in their respective Dorbar Shnongs. Only 1 respondent each (0.8%) mentioned the presence of 1–2 and 3–5 women members, respectively. This shows that in almost all the sampled villages, women's numerical representation in the Dorbar Shnong has expanded substantially, suggesting a visible presence of women in local governance structures.

From a critical perspective, this finding is both significant and encouraging. It reflects a notable shift from traditional practices where women were historically excluded or marginally represented in decision-making spaces. The presence of more than five women members in most councils points toward institutional or community-level openness to gender inclusion and possibly a response to wider national and regional initiatives promoting women's leadership and representation. Such trends also align with Meghalaya's ongoing discourse on balancing its matrilineal social identity with gender equity in governance.

However, while the numbers are promising, it is important to approach this result with caution. The large reported presence of women may not necessarily translate into active participation or decision-making influence. In many cases, representation can be symbolic or limited to non-executive roles without meaningful power in deliberations. Moreover, since 98.3% of respondents gave similar responses, the possibility of social desirability bias — where respondents give answers perceived as socially acceptable — cannot be entirely ruled out.

Overall, this table demonstrates that women's numerical inclusion in village councils has become the norm across most communities studied. Yet, the quality of their participation, the roles they occupy, and their ability to shape decisions remain critical aspects for further exploration to assess whether this numerical representation truly reflects empowerment in practice.

Table 12: How Often Do Women Attend Dorbar Shnong Meetings?

How often do women attend Dorbar Shnong meetings?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Regularly	6	5.0	5.0
	Occasionally	105	87.5	92.5
	Rarely	6	5.0	97.5
	Never	3	2.5	100.0
	Total	120	100.0	

The analysis reveals that the majority of respondents — 105 out of 120 (87.5%) — stated that women attend Dorbar Shnong meetings occasionally, while only 6 respondents (5.0%) reported that women attend regularly, and another 6 respondents (5.0%) indicated that women attend rarely. A small proportion, 3 respondents (2.5%), said that women never attend such meetings. This distribution indicates that although women are generally permitted to attend, their participation is mostly irregular and infrequent in nature.

Critically, the data underscores the gap between formal inclusion and actual participation. While earlier results showed that a large proportion of communities allow women to attend meetings, this table suggests that attendance remains largely situational rather than consistent. The fact that nearly nine out of ten respondents report “occasional” attendance implies that women’s engagement in village-level governance is still contingent upon specific contexts — such as issues directly affecting them or when they are explicitly invited. The low percentage of regular attendees (only 5%) highlights persistent social and structural barriers, including household responsibilities, cultural norms, and lack of confidence or encouragement that may hinder consistent involvement.

From a gender empowerment standpoint, these findings suggest that while progress has been made in breaking traditional barriers, women’s active and regular participation in decision-making forums remains limited. This irregular attendance may also weaken women’s influence in discussions and reduce their capacity to shape community decisions. Therefore, to translate inclusion into meaningful participation, there is a need for greater institutional support, awareness programs, and gender-sensitive policy interventions that encourage regular engagement of women in Dorbar Shnong activities.

Table 13: How Often Are Women’s Opinions Heard or Discussed During Meetings?

How often are women’s opinions heard or discussed during meetings?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Always	97	80.8	80.8	80.8
Sometimes	18	15.0	15.0	95.8
Rarely	3	2.5	2.5	98.3
Never	2	1.7	1.7	100.0
Total	120	100.0	100.0	

The data reveals that a vast majority of respondents — 97 out of 120 (80.8%) — stated that women’s opinions are always heard or discussed during Dorbar Shnong meetings. Another 18 respondents (15.0%) mentioned that women’s views are sometimes considered. In comparison, a small minority of 3 respondents (2.5%) felt that women’s opinions are heard rarely, and 2 respondents (1.7%) reported that women’s views are never discussed. This distribution shows that in most cases, women’s voices are acknowledged within village council deliberations, at least in principle, suggesting a positive shift toward inclusive dialogue in traditional governance forums.

From a critical analytical standpoint, this finding presents both encouraging and thought-provoking insights. The high percentage (over 80%) indicating that women’s opinions are “always” heard may reflect an increased acceptance of women’s contributions to community affairs. This could be the outcome of broader awareness regarding gender equity, evolving socio-cultural norms, and governmental emphasis on participatory governance under various rural development and empowerment programs. It also suggests that women are beginning to occupy a recognized space in local deliberative processes, even within traditionally male-dominated institutions.

However, the finding must be interpreted with caution. The overwhelmingly positive responses could partly result from social desirability bias, where respondents provide answers that align with socially approved views rather than actual practices. Moreover, “being heard” does not necessarily mean that women’s opinions have a decisive impact on outcomes — discussions may occur, but decisions might still be dominated by male voices or traditional hierarchies. The small but notable proportion (around 4%) who reported “rarely” or “never” hearing women’s opinions reminds us that inclusivity remains uneven across different communities.

In conclusion, while the data signifies meaningful progress in women’s visibility and voice within Dorbar Shnong meetings, genuine empowerment depends not only on the frequency of being heard but also on the weight and influence their voices carry in shaping collective decisions. Further qualitative exploration would be valuable to assess whether this apparent inclusion translates into substantive participation and authority in village governance.

Table 14: In Your Opinion, How Active Are Women in the Decision-Making Process of the Dorbar Shnong?

In your opinion, how active are women in the decision-making process of the Dorbar Shnong?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Very Active	6	5.0	5.0	5.0
Moderately Active	110	91.7	91.7	96.7
Slightly Active	3	2.5	2.5	99.2
Not Active at all	1	.8	.8	100.0
Total	120	100.0	100.0	

The analysis shows that a vast majority of respondents — 110 out of 120 (91.7%) — considered women to be moderately active in the decision-making processes of the Dorbar Shnong. Only 6 respondents (5.0%) described women as very active, while 3 respondents (2.5%) felt they are slightly active, and 1 respondent (0.8%) believed women are not active at all. This pattern clearly indicates that while women are increasingly present and involved in the Dorbar Shnong, their participation tends to be moderate rather than assertive or leadership-oriented.

Critically, the dominance of the “moderately active” response suggests that women’s engagement is participatory but still limited by traditional power structures. It reflects a transitional phase in community governance — women are no longer excluded, yet they have not fully achieved parity in influence or decision-making authority. The small proportion (5%) identifying women as “very active” implies that only a few villages or individuals have moved toward more equitable power-sharing practices. Social expectations, traditional gender norms, and limited leadership experience may still constrain women from taking more vocal or directive roles in village affairs.

From an empowerment perspective, these findings are both promising and cautionary. The high participation at a moderate level points to growing acceptance of women’s roles in governance, which aligns with national and regional efforts to strengthen gender inclusion at the grassroots level. However, it also underscores the need for sustained interventions — such as leadership development programs, awareness initiatives, and supportive policy measures — to transform women’s participation from symbolic or consultative to substantive and authoritative within the Dorbar Shnong decision-making structure.

Table 15: Have You Personally Seen or Heard Women Speaking During Dorbar Meetings?

Have you personally seen or heard women speaking during Dorbar meetings?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	109	90.8	90.8	90.8
Valid No	11	9.2	9.2	100.0
Total	120	100.0	100.0	

The data reveal that 109 respondents (90.8%) affirmed that they have personally seen or heard women speaking during Dorbar Shnong meetings, while 11 respondents (9.2%) stated that they have not observed such participation. This strong majority response suggests that women's verbal participation and visibility in traditional village meetings have become a common and socially accepted phenomenon across most of the surveyed communities.

From a critical standpoint, this finding represents a significant step forward in the evolution of women's roles in local governance. Historically, the Dorbar Shnong functioned as a male-centric institution where women's presence and speech were restricted or discouraged. The fact that over 90% of respondents have witnessed women actively speaking in such forums highlights a tangible cultural shift toward inclusivity and the breakdown of rigid gender barriers. This visibility not only signals women's growing confidence and social acceptance but also serves as an empowering model for younger generations of women within the community.

However, while women's participation as speakers marks progress, the nature, frequency, and impact of their contributions remain critical to assess. It is possible that women are permitted to speak but not necessarily to influence the outcomes of deliberations. The 9.2% who have not seen women speak may represent areas where patriarchal norms still hold sway or where women's presence remains passive.

In conclusion, this data reflects a positive cultural transition from exclusion to visible engagement. The high level of acknowledgment of women speaking in Dorbar Shnong meetings is a promising indicator of changing gender dynamics, yet the next analytical step must examine whether this visibility translates into decision-making power, leadership, and sustained participation within the traditional governance structure.

Table 16: Do You Think Women's Presence Has Improved the Quality of Community Decisions?

Do you think women's presence has improved the quality of community decisions?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly Agree	11	9.2	9.2	9.2
Valid Agree	106	88.3	88.3	97.5
Valid Neutral	2	1.7	1.7	99.2
Valid Disagree	1	.8	.8	100.0
Total	120	100.0	100.0	

The data demonstrates that an overwhelming majority of respondents — 106 out of 120 (88.3%) — agreed that women's presence has improved the quality of community decisions, while 11 respondents (9.2%) strongly agreed with this statement. Only 2 respondents (1.7%) remained neutral, and a single respondent (0.8%) disagreed. This clearly indicates that most community members perceive women's participation as having a positive and constructive impact on local decision-making processes.

Critically analyzing these findings, it becomes evident that the inclusion of women in the Dorbar Shnong is not only accepted but also valued by the community. The high levels of agreement (a combined 97.5%) suggest a recognition that women bring distinct perspectives, empathy, and a sense of social responsibility that enhance the inclusiveness and effectiveness of community deliberations. This aligns with gender development theories which argue that diversity in governance enriches collective reasoning and promotes more balanced outcomes. The small fraction of neutral or disagreeing respondents may reflect either lingering traditional attitudes or skepticism about women's influence within male-dominated forums.

Overall, this result signifies a positive attitudinal shift in the perception of women's roles in governance. It reinforces the idea that women's participation is not merely symbolic but substantively improves the quality and fairness of community decisions. This also reflects growing awareness in society about the value of gender-balanced leadership, supporting India's larger developmental vision under initiatives promoting inclusive local governance.

Table 17: Should More Women Be Encouraged to Take Leadership Roles in the Dorbar Shnong?

Should more women be encouraged to take leadership roles in the Dorbar Shnong?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	107	89.2	89.2	89.2
No	5	4.2	4.2	93.3
Valid Not Sure	5	4.2	4.2	97.5
6.00	3	2.5	2.5	100.0
Total	120	100.0	100.0	

The data reveals that 107 respondents (89.2%) strongly supported the idea that more women should be encouraged to take leadership roles in the Dorbar Shnong. Only 5 respondents (4.2%) opposed the idea, while another 5 respondents (4.2%) were not sure, and 3 respondents (2.5%) gave unclear responses (coded as “6.00”). This overwhelming support demonstrates strong community endorsement for expanding women’s leadership within traditional governance structures.

From a critical perspective, the findings highlight an important social transition — from passive acceptance of women’s presence to active encouragement of their leadership. This reflects an evolution in mindset, where community members increasingly recognize women’s potential as capable decision-makers and leaders. The near-consensus in favor of greater female leadership suggests that the traditional notion of governance being a male domain is being challenged at the grassroots level. However, the small proportion of respondents who remain opposed or uncertain indicates that residual resistance persists, possibly among those who still adhere to conventional norms or fear disruption of established power hierarchies.

Overall, the results underscore strong public support for gender-progressive reform in local governance. The growing endorsement of women’s leadership aligns with India’s broader objectives of achieving inclusive governance and empowerment under *Viksit Bharat 2047*. Nevertheless, translating such attitudinal support into actual leadership appointments and equitable power-sharing remains the crucial next step toward genuine transformation.

Table 18: What Prevents Women from Greater Participation?

10. What prevents women from greater participation? (You may select more than one)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Traditional Restrictions	8	6.7	6.7	6.7
Family Pressures	3	2.5	2.5	9.2
Valid Lack of Education	4	3.3	3.3	12.5
Lack of Opportunity	3	2.5	2.5	15.0
Other	102	85.0	85.0	100.0
Total	120	100.0	100.0	

The responses indicate that **102 out of 120 respondents (85.0%)** attributed women's limited participation in the *Dorbar Shnong* to “other” factors, while **8 respondents (6.7%)** identified **traditional restrictions**, **4 respondents (3.3%)** cited **lack of education**, **3 respondents (2.5%)** mentioned **family pressures**, and another **3 respondents (2.5%)** pointed to **lack of opportunity**. The predominance of “other” as a response suggests that the causes of limited participation are more complex and possibly context-specific, extending beyond the predefined options provided in the questionnaire.

Critically, this distribution highlights that although cultural and educational barriers remain relevant, respondents perceive broader and more nuanced constraints influencing women's participation. These may include internalized gender norms, limited exposure to leadership training, fear of criticism, or lack of institutional encouragement. The relatively low percentages for family and traditional restrictions could also reflect changing social attitudes in Meghalaya's matrilineal society, where women hold high social status but still face informal exclusion from decision-making spaces.

The dominance of the “other” category warrants qualitative exploration to identify the deeper socio-cultural or structural barriers at play. It is possible that respondents hesitated to openly acknowledge sensitive issues such as male dominance, gender bias within customary laws, or political disinterest among women. Hence, while quantitative data points to a generally supportive environment for women's inclusion, the persistence of unarticulated barriers indicates that empowerment is still constrained by underlying social dynamics.

In summary, the table reveals that **hidden and context-driven factors**, rather than overt restrictions, may now be the main obstacles to women's full participation. This calls for focused interventions such as community sensitization, leadership capacity-building, and the gradual reform of traditional governance frameworks to create a truly inclusive environment.

Table 19: In Your Opinion, What Measures Can Increase Women's Participation?

In your opinion, what measures can increase women's participation?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Awareness Program	12	10.0	10.0	10.0
Leadership Training	106	88.3	88.3	98.3
6.00	2	1.7	1.7	100.0
Total	120	100.0	100.0	

The data indicates that a vast majority of respondents — 106 out of 120 (88.3%) — believed that leadership training is the most effective measure to increase women's participation in the Dorbar Shnong. Meanwhile, 12 respondents (10.0%) emphasized the need for awareness programs, and 2 respondents (1.7%) provided other or unclear responses (coded as "6.00").

This distribution highlights a strong consensus that empowerment through skill development and leadership training is more impactful than mere awareness generation. It reflects an understanding among the respondents that women's inclusion requires practical capacity-building — equipping them with confidence, communication skills, and administrative knowledge to participate effectively in community governance. Awareness programs, though important, are seen as preliminary steps, while leadership training addresses the structural gap between potential and performance.

Critically, the data suggests that the community recognizes the need to go beyond token representation and invest in empowering women as active leaders, not just participants. This insight is significant, as it aligns with global frameworks for women's empowerment that stress education, mentorship, and leadership development as catalysts for sustainable change. The negligible proportion of unclear responses indicates near-unanimous community support for proactive strategies to promote women's participation.

Overall, the findings emphasize that transformative participation will come from capacity enhancement initiatives that make women not only visible but influential in governance. Institutional support from the government, NGOs, and academic bodies could play a crucial role in realizing this vision through targeted training and leadership programs.

Section 2: Social Empowerment Perception

Table 20: Do You Feel Women's Involvement in Village Councils Leads to Community Development?

1. Do you feel women's involvement in village councils leads to community development?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	108	90.0	90.0	90.0
No	4	3.3	3.3	93.3
Valid Do'nt know/Can't Say//Not Sure	8	6.7	6.7	100.0
Total	120	100.0	100.0	

A large majority of respondents — 108 out of 120 (90.0%) — affirmed that women's involvement in village councils leads to community development. Only 4 respondents (3.3%) disagreed, while 8 respondents (6.7%) were uncertain or chose "don't know." This overwhelming majority indicates that the community strongly perceives a direct and positive relationship between women's participation and developmental outcomes at the grassroots level.

From an analytical perspective, this result suggests that women are viewed as constructive contributors to social progress, community welfare, and inclusive decision-making. The high level of agreement reinforces the belief that gender-inclusive governance fosters more balanced and responsive policies, especially in areas like health, education, and social justice. It also reflects a growing awareness that development is most effective when it incorporates diverse perspectives — a core principle of participatory democracy.

The small number of dissenting and uncertain respondents could represent those who are either skeptical of the practical impact of women's involvement or unaware of its tangible benefits due to limited exposure to female leadership. Nonetheless, the overall findings depict a community largely aligned with the vision of "Vikasit Bharat 2047", where inclusive participation is central to sustainable development.

Table 21: Do Women Leaders Act as Role Models for Younger Women in Your Village?

2. Do women leaders act as role models for younger women in your village?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	108	90.0	90.0	90.0
No	6	5.0	5.0	95.0
To some extent	6	5.0	5.0	100.0
Total	120	100.0	100.0	

The data reveals that 108 respondents (90.0%) believed that women leaders act as role models for younger women in their village. Another 6 respondents (5.0%) disagreed, while an equal number (6 respondents, 5.0%) felt this was true to some extent.

This clearly shows that the vast majority of the community recognizes the inspirational role of women leaders in motivating the next generation. Women in visible leadership positions not only challenge traditional gender norms but also demonstrate that political participation and leadership are attainable for other women. This creates a ripple effect of empowerment, where visibility translates into aspiration and aspiration into action.

Critically, the high percentage of positive responses suggests that representation has a transformative social value — it normalizes women's leadership and encourages young women to engage in public life. However, the small minority who either disagreed or offered partial agreement could reflect contexts where women leaders remain exceptions rather than the norm, limiting their inspirational influence.

Overall, this finding highlights the broader socio-cultural impact of women's leadership — beyond administrative contributions, they serve as symbols of change and agency. Their presence in governance spaces contributes not only to community development but also to the long-term reshaping of gender perceptions in traditional societies.

Qualitative Findings from Personal Interview: Women's Participation and Representation in the Dorbar Shnong

The qualitative data provide a richer, more nuanced picture of how women experience participation in the Dorbar Shnong beyond numerical inclusion. Interviews and FGDs reveal that women's voices are increasingly present, yet their participation remains circumscribed by traditional norms, cultural expectations, and institutional boundaries.

A recurring narrative across participants was that women's presence in meetings is often conditional and context-specific. Many respondents stated that women are invited when issues relate to social welfare, education, health, or community well-being, but rarely when discussions involve conflict resolution, land matters, or political negotiations. One participant noted, "Women are not always invited; they are mostly called when the meeting is about social welfare or school matters." Another reflected, "We can speak, but sometimes we feel that our suggestions are taken only if they fit what the Rangbah Shnong or the elders already think."

The qualitative accounts highlight a subtle power imbalance: while women are respected socially, their contributions in governance spaces are moderated by expectations of "proper behaviour," "good conduct," and "respectful tone." A local elder commented, "Women can give suggestions, but they should know how to speak properly; otherwise the elders may not take it well." Such narratives indicate an invisible but influential norm that women's participation should remain non-confrontational and aligned with the established male authority.

Respondents also emphasized that educated women and role models—especially local leaders such as Amparin Lyngdoh and Mavis Dunn Lyngdoh—have encouraged more women to attend the Dorbar. A participant stated, "Seeing educated women taking part in community work gives us courage. Earlier, we never thought we could speak in meetings." This reflects a slow cultural shift where women's voices are becoming normalized.

Despite these positive trends, several women expressed the need for structured support. As one participant said, "We want training... we don't always know the procedures of the Dorbar, so sometimes we hesitate

to speak.” Another added, “If we get proper training, we can take leadership roles too, but nobody trains us.” These narratives reveal that empowerment is not only about access but also about capacity, confidence, and institutional recognition.

Overall, the qualitative findings highlight a dual phenomenon: symbolic inclusion that legitimizes women’s presence in certain thematic areas, and emerging substantive participation driven by education, exposure, and gradual cultural change.

Analysis

The insights from quantitative and qualitative data reveal a society in transition—moving from a historically male-centered governance structure to a slowly evolving model of gender-inclusive community leadership. The integration of both datasets presents a coherent yet complex narrative about women’s participation in the Dorbar Shnong.

Quantitatively, respondents overwhelmingly acknowledged that women now have access to Dorbar meetings (91.7%) and are increasingly visible in membership or executive roles (85.8%). However, participation remains largely occasional (87.5%) and mostly moderate in decision-making (91.7%), indicating that structural inclusion has not yet fully translated into influence or authority. High support for leadership training (88.3%) and for increasing women’s roles (89.2%) further highlights a strong readiness for change at the community level.

The qualitative findings add depth to these patterns by uncovering the cultural and institutional dynamics beneath the numbers. While quantitative data show the presence of women, qualitative narratives reveal the conditional nature of this presence. Women are often invited only for specific themes—particularly welfare-oriented agendas. As echoed in participant statements such as “Women are usually called when it is about social welfare or health,” inclusion remains limited to socially acceptable spheres, reinforcing gendered boundaries within governance.

The analysis also reaffirms the paradox of the Khasi matrilineal system. Though women inherit lineage, property, and social respect, this does not automatically grant them political authority. Both datasets converge in showing that matriliney offers a foundation of respect but not representation. This contradiction is increasingly recognized by respondents who acknowledge women’s competence yet hesitate to accord them equal decision-making power.

The triangulation further illustrates how emerging female role models and educated women have begun reshaping these perceptions. Quantitative support for women’s training and leadership aligns with qualitative accounts where male elders and community leaders express growing appreciation of women’s inputs. This attitudinal shift, while gradual, signals movement from tokenistic participation toward more substantive involvement.

At the same time, triangulation exposes persistent structural barriers: gendered norms around “appropriate behaviour,” limited access to key governance domains, and hesitation to accept women in conflict resolution roles. These structural constraints underscore that formal inclusion without cultural and institutional reform remains insufficient.

Overall, the triangulated findings highlight that women’s empowerment in the Dorbar Shnong is evolving along two interconnected pathways:

Structural inclusion—where women are increasingly visible in meetings and committees; and

Substantive participation—still emerging, contingent on training, cultural shifts, and institutional recognition.

The convergence of both datasets underscores that meaningful empowerment will require deliberate policy support, targeted capacity-building, and a broader cultural shift that recognizes women not merely as custodians of welfare but as legitimate, equal decision-makers in traditional governance.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a transitional landscape in women's participation within the Dorbar Shnong of Meghalaya—marked by meaningful progress but still constrained by deeply embedded cultural norms. Quantitatively, most respondents acknowledge that women are now allowed to attend meetings and hold positions, demonstrating a shift toward structural inclusion. However, both datasets show that women's participation continues to be conditional, thematic, and context-specific rather than universally accepted. While women are welcomed in discussions related to health, education, and welfare, their roles in deliberations involving land, conflict resolution, or political negotiations remain restricted. The qualitative data—through statements such as “we are invited only when the matter concerns welfare” and “women can speak, but they should speak properly”—makes it evident that cultural expectations still regulate the nature and scope of women's voice within the Dorbar Shnong.

These patterns align with broader scholarship on governance in matrilineal societies, which consistently highlights the paradox of matriliney without corresponding political authority for women. Ellena (2018) and Nongkynrih (2015) observe that although Khasi women inherit lineage and property, decision-making power historically rests with male elders—an observation reaffirmed strongly by the current findings. The persistence of traditional norms governing leadership roles explains why respondents in this study express confidence in women's moral integrity yet remain hesitant to fully endorse their authority in conflict management or politically sensitive domains. Similar contradictions have been noted in other indigenous communities; for instance, Kynshi (2020) argues that matrilineal identity often masks patriarchal governance structures, resulting in symbolic but not substantive representation—mirroring the cautious acceptance seen in this study.

Moreover, the study's findings resonate with national-level research on women's local governance in India. Evidence from Beaman et al. (2009) demonstrates that exposure to female leaders gradually improves perceptions of women's competence. This is consistent with the narratives shared by respondents who cite local role models such as Amparin Lyngdoh as catalysts for changing mindsets within their communities. Yet, consistent with the present study's findings, research by Brulé (2018) notes that while reservations increase numerical representation, women often face persistent barriers—informal norms, restricted access to information, and lack of training—that limit their influence. The demand for leadership training expressed by 88% of respondents strongly supports this view and aligns with studies from the Institute for Social and Economic Change (ISEC, 2021), which show that capacity-building significantly enhances women's confidence and participation in rural governance.

Recent policy reviews and media reports in Meghalaya also align with the study's findings. Public debate—captured in *The Shillong Times* (2024) and the North East Network (2023)—reflects growing awareness that women's formal exclusion from traditional councils is no longer socially or politically viable. These sources highlight increasing community-level advocacy for the recognition of women's rights to participate in traditional governance structures. The present study contributes empirical evidence

to this discourse, demonstrating that public perception at the grassroots level is evolving: while traditional boundaries remain, communities—especially the younger generation—are more open to women assuming formal leadership roles.

In summary, this study's findings correspond with a broad pattern observed in gender and governance literature: numerical presence does not automatically translate into substantive power. Women's inclusion in the Dorbar Shnong is expanding, yet the extent of their influence is shaped by cultural expectations, male-dominated norms, and limited access to leadership resources. The study thus affirms that meaningful empowerment requires a combination of institutional reform, leadership development, and normative change. The evidence suggests that Meghalaya stands at a critical juncture where traditional structures are gradually accommodating gender-inclusive practices—an evolution that, if supported through policy and community engagement, could lead to more democratic and equitable village governance.

Conclusion

The study highlights the complexities of women's representation in East Khasi Hills' village councils. While women's presence is increasing, their decision-making influence remains limited. To address this, sustained efforts are needed to promote women's substantive participation, including capacity-building programs, awareness initiatives, and institutional reforms. This can lead to more inclusive and responsive governance, driving positive change and development in the region. Ultimately, empowering women in local governance can have a profound impact on community development and gender equality.

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