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5

## Gender Relations and the Web of Traditions: Status of Women in Northeast India

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### **Abstract**

*This research paper examines the complex interplay between gender relations and traditional sociocultural systems in Northeast India, focusing on the status of women across the region's diverse ethnic communities. Through rigorous secondary data analysis of demographic statistics, socioeconomic indicators, and anthropological studies up to 2020, this study offers insights into the paradoxical position of women in the region. While Northeast Indian women enjoy relatively better status and visibility in public domains compared to many parts of India, they continue to face significant challenges regarding political representation, economic autonomy, and protection from violence. The research identifies considerable variations across states and communities, where matrilineal traditions coexist with patriarchal norms and modernization processes. This paper contributes to the scholarly discourse by highlighting how women's status remains deeply embedded in culturally specific traditions while being simultaneously transformed by contemporary socioeconomic changes, leading to both empowerment and new forms of vulnerability.*

**Keywords:** Gender relations, Northeast India, Tribal communities, Women's status, Matriliny, Tradition,

### **1. Introduction**

Northeast India, comprising eight states—Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura—represents one of the most ethnically, linguistically, and culturally diverse regions of the country. This diversity extends to gender relations, with the region often cited as having more egalitarian gender norms compared to many other parts of India.<sup>1</sup> The frequently emphasized presence of matrilineal systems in Meghalaya and matrifocal elements in various tribal communities has contributed to a narrative of women's relatively elevated status in the region.<sup>2</sup> However, this simplified

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narrative obscures the complex realities of gender relations and women's status across different communities and states within Northeast India.

The status of women in any society is multidimensional, encompassing economic participation, educational attainment, political representation, health outcomes, decision-making power, and freedom from violence.<sup>3</sup> In Northeast India, these dimensions exhibit striking variations, reflecting the region's heterogeneous sociocultural landscape. Women's experiences are shaped by intersecting factors including ethnicity, religion, class, rural-urban location, and educational background.<sup>4</sup>

This paper aims to provide a nuanced analysis of women's status in Northeast India by examining secondary data from multiple sources including census reports, National Family Health Surveys (NFHS), economic surveys, crime statistics, and anthropological studies up to 2020.

**The research addresses the following questions:**

1. How do demographic and socioeconomic indicators reflect women's status across Northeast Indian states?
2. What patterns of continuity and change characterize women's roles in traditional and contemporary contexts?
3. How do cultural traditions and modernization processes interact to shape gender relations in the region?
4. What implications do these patterns have for gender equality policies and women's empowerment initiatives?

By addressing these questions, this research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of gender relations in Northeast India beyond simplistic generalizations. It highlights both achievements and persistent challenges in women's status while recognizing the diversity of women's experiences across different communities within the region.

## **2. Methodology**

This research employs a comprehensive secondary data analysis approach, drawing on multiple data sources to examine the status of women in Northeast India. Secondary data analysis involves the utilization of existing data collected for purposes other than the current research to investigate new research questions or apply alternative perspectives.<sup>5</sup> This methodology is particularly valuable for analyzing broad socioeconomic patterns across diverse geographical regions.

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## 2.1 Data Sources

The study synthesizes data from the following sources:

1. Census of India (2001, 2011)
2. National Family Health Survey-4 (2015-16)
3. National Sample Survey Organization reports (up to 2019-20)
4. Crime in India reports by National Crime Records Bureau (2015-2020)
5. Statistical profiles of states published by respective state governments
6. Academic research studies and ethnographies published in peer-reviewed journals
7. Reports from national and international organizations including the Ministry of Women and Child Development, UN Women, and UNDP (up to 2020)

## 2.2 Analytical Framework

The analysis employs both quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine various dimensions of women's status. The quantitative analysis focuses on demographic indicators (sex ratio, life expectancy), socioeconomic parameters (literacy, workforce participation, asset ownership), political participation metrics, and health indicators across states. For qualitative dimensions, the research reviews ethnographic studies and sociological research to understand cultural practices, gender norms, and women's lived experiences across different communities.

The analytical framework incorporates intersectionality as a key concept, recognizing that women's experiences are shaped by multiple intersecting factors including ethnicity, religion, class, and geographical location.<sup>6</sup> This approach allows for identifying variations in women's status across different social groups within the region.

## 2.3 Limitations

This methodology has several limitations that should be acknowledged:

1. Reliance on secondary data means the research is constrained by the quality, reliability, and timeliness of existing data sources.
2. Some northeastern states have limited data availability, creating gaps in comprehensive comparative analysis.
3. Aggregated data at the state level may obscure significant intra-state variations, particularly between different ethnic communities.

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4. Official statistics may not fully capture informal economic activities where women are heavily engaged.
5. Cultural nuances and qualitative aspects of gender relations may not be adequately reflected in quantitative indicators.

Despite these limitations, the triangulation of multiple data sources and the combination of quantitative and qualitative analyses provide a robust foundation for examining the status of women in Northeast India.

### 3. Demographic and Educational Profile

#### 3.1 Sex Ratio and Population Dynamics

The sex ratio, defined as the number of females per 1000 males, serves as a fundamental demographic indicator reflecting gender relations in society. Northeast India presents an interesting demographic picture with considerable variation across states. Table 1 shows the sex ratio across Northeast Indian states based on Census 2011 data.

**Table 1: Sex Ratio in Northeast Indian States (Census 2011)**

State	Sex Ratio (females per 1000 males)	Child Sex Ratio (0-6 years)
Arunachal Pradesh	938	972
Assam	958	962
Manipur	992	934
Meghalaya	989	970
Mizoram	976	971
Nagaland	931	943
Sikkim	890	957

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State	Sex Ratio (females per 1000 males)	Child Sex Ratio (0-6 years)
Tripura	960	966
<b>Northeast Average</b>	<b>954</b>	<b>959</b>
<b>All India</b>	<b>943</b>	<b>919</b>

Source: Census of India, 2011<sup>7</sup>

The data reveals that most northeastern states have more favorable sex ratios than the national average (943), with Manipur (992) and Meghalaya (989) showing particularly balanced gender compositions. The child sex ratio (0-6 years) is also notably higher across all northeastern states compared to the national average of 919, suggesting less prevalence of son preference and sex-selective practices.<sup>8</sup> This relative demographic balance is often attributed to the cultural value placed on women in many tribal societies of the region.<sup>9</sup>

An examination of longitudinal census data from 2001 to 2011 shows marginal improvements in overall sex ratio in most northeastern states, though Sikkim and Nagaland exhibited declining trends. The relatively balanced sex ratio reflects the absence of extreme forms of gender discrimination prevalent in some other regions of India.

However, demographic indicators alone cannot capture the complex realities of gender relations and must be interpreted alongside other socioeconomic indicators.<sup>10</sup>

### 3.2 Educational Status

Education represents a critical dimension of women's empowerment and status in society. Female literacy rates in Northeast India demonstrate significant progress over recent decades, though disparities persist across states and between rural and urban areas. Table 2 presents female literacy rates across northeastern states.

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**Table 2: Female Literacy Rates in Northeast Indian States (2011)**

State	Female Literacy Rate (%)	Male-Female Literacy Gap (percentage points)	Rural Female Literacy (%)
Arunachal Pradesh	59.6	14.1	54.0
Assam	67.3	11.5	63.7
Manipur	73.2	13.3	67.8
Meghalaya	73.8	3.4	70.4
Mizoram	89.4	4.3	85.6
Nagaland	76.7	7.1	72.5
Sikkim	76.4	10.9	71.9
Tripura	83.1	8.5	79.8
<b>Northeast Average</b>	<b>74.9</b>	<b>9.1</b>	<b>70.7</b>
<b>All India</b>	<b>65.5</b>	<b>16.3</b>	<b>58.8</b>

*Source: Census of India, 2011<sup>7</sup>*

The data reveals that female literacy in Northeast India (74.9%) significantly exceeds the national average (65.5%). Mizoram leads with an impressive 89.4% female literacy rate, while Arunachal Pradesh lags at 59.6%. Notably, the gender gap in literacy is also lower in northeastern states (9.1 percentage points) compared to the national average (16.3 percentage points), with Meghalaya demonstrating a particularly narrow gap (3.4 percentage points).<sup>11</sup>

Higher education enrollment data from the All India Survey on Higher Education (2018-19) shows that women's participation in higher education is substantial in the region, with Gender Parity Index (GPI)

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exceeding 1.0 in Meghalaya, Nagaland, and Sikkim, indicating more female than male students in higher education institutions.<sup>12</sup>

**This educational progress can be attributed to several factors including:**

1. Historical influence of Christian missionary education emphasizing gender-neutral educational opportunities
2. Traditional value placed on women's intellectual development in many tribal communities
3. Government policies promoting girls' education
4. Relatively less restrictive social norms regarding women's mobility and public participation.<sup>13</sup>

**Despite these achievements, challenges persist, including:**

1. Dropout rates remain higher for girls in secondary education across several states
2. Significant rural-urban disparities in female educational access and quality
3. Stream segregation with women underrepresented in STEM fields
4. Limited translation of educational achievements into commensurate employment opportunities.<sup>14</sup>

The educational profile suggests that while northeastern women enjoy relatively better access to education compared to many parts of India, continued efforts are needed to address remaining disparities and ensure educational attainment translates into broader empowerment outcomes.

#### ***4. Economic Participation and Workforce Dynamics***

##### **4.1 Labor Force Participation**

Women's economic participation represents a crucial dimension of their status and autonomy. Northeast India presents a distinctive pattern of female labor force participation compared to the national average, with significant variations across states. Table 3 presents state-wise female work participation rates based on Census 2011 data.

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**Table 3: Female Work Participation Rate (WPR) in Northeast Indian States (2011)**

State	Female WPR (%)	Male WPR (%)	Rural Female WPR (%)	Urban Female WPR (%)
Arunachal Pradesh	35.4	49.1	41.3	19.7
Assam	22.5	53.6	23.7	14.9
Manipur	39.9	52.4	40.8	38.2
Meghalaya	32.7	47.2	36.8	23.6
Mizoram	36.2	52.4	44.1	29.3
Nagaland	44.7	53.4	51.7	23.2
Sikkim	38.6	59.3	42.5	23.5
Tripura	23.6	55.7	24.2	21.8
<b>Northeast Average</b>	<b>34.2</b>	<b>52.9</b>	<b>38.1</b>	<b>24.3</b>
<b>All India</b>	<b>25.5</b>	<b>53.3</b>	<b>30.0</b>	<b>15.4</b>

Source: Census of India, 2011 <sup>7</sup>

The data reveals that female work participation rates in Northeast India (34.2%) exceed the national average (25.5%), with Nagaland (44.7%) and Manipur (39.9%) showing particularly high rates. Interestingly, rural female participation (38.1%) significantly exceeds urban participation (24.3%) across most states, contrasting with typical modernization patterns.<sup>15</sup> This trend reflects the continued importance of agriculture, forestry, and allied activities where women traditionally play substantial roles in northeastern rural economies.



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The Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2018-19 indicates that northeastern states generally maintain higher female labor force participation rates than the national average, though with some decline compared to earlier decades. This decline has been attributed to:

1. Structural economic shifts away from agriculture where women had higher participation
2. Mechanization of traditional female-dominated agricultural tasks
3. Increasing educational enrollment delaying workforce entry
4. Limited formal sector employment opportunities for women.<sup>16</sup>

#### 4.2 Occupational Patterns and Sectoral Distribution

Analysis of sectoral distribution reveals that northeastern women's economic activities remain heavily concentrated in the primary sector, particularly agriculture, with limited representation in the organized sector. According to NSSO 68th Round data, over 70% of working women in rural Northeast India were engaged in agriculture and allied activities.<sup>17</sup>

Women's representation in public sector employment shows significant interstate variation. Manipur leads with women constituting approximately 31.2% of state government employees, while Assam lags with only 19.6% female representation in government services as of 2019.<sup>18</sup> In the organized private sector, women's presence remains limited except in specific industries such as handloom, handicraft, food processing, and tourism, which build upon traditional skills.

A distinctive feature of northeastern women's economic activity is their dominant position in local trade and markets. Women-run markets are cultural institutions in states like Manipur (Ima Keithel) and Meghalaya, representing unique economic spaces controlled by women.<sup>19</sup> However, despite this visibility in traditional commerce, women's participation in modern business enterprises and entrepreneurship remains constrained by limited access to credit, business networks, and technology.<sup>20</sup>

The region has also witnessed significant engagement of women in the informal economy, with substantial participation in street vending, small-scale retail, and home-based production. While this indicates economic agency, it also reflects limited access to formal employment opportunities with security and benefits.<sup>21</sup>

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### 4.3 Asset Ownership and Economic Decision-Making

Property ownership and control over economic resources represent critical indicators of women's economic empowerment. In Northeast India, traditional systems of property rights exhibit considerable diversity:

1. In matrilineal communities of Meghalaya (particularly Khasi and Garo), ancestral property passes through the female line, though management often rests with maternal uncles or brothers
2. In patrilineal tribal communities, customary laws generally restrict women's inheritance rights despite statutory provisions
3. In valley areas of Assam and Tripura, Hindu and Muslim personal laws govern inheritance with varying degrees of gender discrimination<sup>22</sup>

The National Family Health Survey-4 (2015-16) provides insights into women's economic decision-making power. The percentage of married women participating in household financial decisions ranges from 72.4% in Mizoram to 80.9% in Sikkim, exceeding the national average of 63.0%.<sup>23</sup> However, women's control over earned income shows greater variation, with Naga women reporting among the highest levels of autonomy while women in Assam's plains report more restrictions.

Land ownership data reveals significant gender disparities despite relatively progressive cultural narratives. Even in Meghalaya, where matriliney prevails, women's formal land ownership is increasingly challenged by modernization processes and individualization of property rights.<sup>24</sup> Across other northeastern states, women's land ownership proportions remain significantly lower than men's, though generally higher than the national average.<sup>25</sup>

Overall, northeastern women's economic participation reflects a complex interplay of enabling cultural factors and structural constraints. Their visibility in economic spaces coexists with persistent barriers to equal economic opportunities and resource control, creating a paradoxical situation that defies simple characterization.

## 5. Political Participation and Public Representation

### 5.1 Women in Electoral Politics

Despite their active participation in various social movements and public spheres, women's representation in formal political institutions remains strikingly low across Northeast India. Table 4 presents the percentage of women legislators in state assemblies based on the most recent elections prior to 2020.

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**Table 4: Women's Representation in State Legislative Assemblies in Northeast India (as of 2019)**

State	Total Seats	Women MLAs	Percentage (%)
Arunachal Pradesh	60	3	5.0
Assam	126	8	6.3
Manipur	60	2	3.3
Meghalaya	60	3	5.0
Mizoram	40	0	0.0
Nagaland	60	0	0.0
Sikkim	32	3	9.4
Tripura	60	5	8.3
<b>Northeast Average</b>			<b>4.7</b>
<b>National Average</b>			<b>9.1</b>

*Source: Election Commission of India and State Election Commissions, 2019<sup>26</sup>*

The data reveals that women's representation in state legislatures across Northeast India (4.7%) falls significantly below the already low national average (9.1%). Particularly striking is the complete absence of women legislators in Mizoram and Nagaland as of 2019. Even Meghalaya, often highlighted for its matrilineal traditions, shows minimal female representation at just 5%.<sup>27</sup>

Women's representation in the Lok Sabha (lower house of parliament) from northeastern states has been similarly limited.

In the 2019 general elections, only 2 women were elected from the entire Northeast region out of 25 parliamentary constituencies, constituting just 8% of northeastern representatives.<sup>28</sup>

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**Several factors contribute to women's limited representation in electoral politics:**

1. Male-dominated political party structures that restrict women's access to tickets
2. Limited financial resources for electoral campaigns
3. Cultural norms discouraging women's leadership in certain public domains
4. Intersecting barriers of ethnicity and gender in identity-based politics
5. Electoral violence and militarization creating gendered security concerns
6. Reservation policies for scheduled tribes and scheduled castes frequently benefiting men from these communities<sup>29</sup>

The case of Nagaland represents a particularly striking contradiction. Despite women's active economic roles and educational achievements, municipal elections were postponed multiple times due to opposition to women's reservation, with traditional tribal bodies citing protection of customary laws under Article 371(A) of the Constitution.<sup>30</sup>

**5.2 Women in Local Governance**

Women's participation in local governance presents a mixed picture. The extension of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (mandating 33% reservation for women in local bodies) to northeastern states has been irregular and contested. In states where Panchayati Raj Institutions operate, such as Assam, Sikkim, and Tripura, women's representation has increased substantially, reaching the mandated one-third proportion and in some cases exceeding it.<sup>31</sup>

However, in states with autonomous district councils under the Sixth Schedule or special provisions (Meghalaya, Mizoram, and parts of Assam), women's representation remains minimal. Traditional governance institutions such as village councils in Nagaland and Mizoram continue to exclude women almost entirely.<sup>32</sup>

Ethnographic studies indicate that even when women enter local governance through reservations, they often face challenges including:

1. Proxy representation with male family members exercising actual power
2. Lack of training and capacity building
3. Social resistance to their decision-making authority

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4. Multiple burden of domestic, economic, and political responsibilities<sup>33</sup>

### 5.3 Women in Social Movements and Civil Society

In contrast to their limited representation in formal political institutions, northeastern women have been prominently involved in various social movements and civil society organizations. Women's collective action has addressed diverse issues including:

1. Anti-militarization and human rights (Meira Paibis in Manipur)
2. Anti-alcohol movements (Naga Mothers' Association)
3. Peace-building initiatives (North East Network)
4. Environmental protection (Chipko-inspired movements in Garo Hills)
5. Economic rights (women vendors' associations)<sup>34</sup>

The Meira Paibis (Torch Bearers) of Manipur represent one of the most visible women's collective actions against state violence, particularly protesting the Armed Forces Special Powers Act. Their iconic protest methods, including the "naked protest" against the rape and murder of Thangjam Manorama in 2004, demonstrate women's moral authority in challenging militarization<sup>35</sup>

However, research indicates that women's prominence in social movements has not translated into proportional representation in formal political structures or peace negotiations. Even as women mobilize for community concerns, decision-making authority in both traditional and modern institutions continues to be dominated by men.<sup>36</sup>

This dichotomy between women's activism and their formal political representation reflects complex intersections between gender, ethnicity, and political institutions in Northeast India. It highlights the limitations of equating visibility with substantive power and underscores the need for structural changes to achieve gender-balanced political representation.

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## 6. Health, Violence, and Bodily Autonomy

### 6.1 Reproductive Health and Maternal Wellbeing

Reproductive health indicators reveal significant progress alongside persistent challenges for northeastern women. Table 5 presents key maternal health indicators across northeastern states based on NFHS-4 (2015-16) data.

**Table 5: Selected Maternal Health Indicators in Northeast Indian States (2015-16)**

State	Institutional Births (%)	Mothers who received full antenatal care (%)	Modern Contraceptive Prevalence Rate (%)	Total Fertility Rate
Arunachal Pradesh	52.3	27.3	23.1	2.1
Assam	70.6	18.1	37.0	2.2
Manipur	69.1	39.9	13.2	2.6
Meghalaya	51.4	23.5	23.0	3.0
Mizoram	79.7	36.2	35.5	2.7
Nagaland	32.8	15.0	28.0	2.7
Sikkim	94.7	63.0	47.4	1.2
Tripura	79.9	25.5	40.1	1.7
<b>Northeast Average</b>	<b>66.3</b>	<b>31.1</b>	<b>30.9</b>	<b>2.3</b>
<b>All India</b>	<b>78.9</b>	<b>21.0</b>	<b>47.8</b>	<b>2.2</b>

Source: National Family Health Survey-4, 2015-16<sup>23</sup>

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The data shows considerable variation across northeastern states in maternal healthcare access. Sikkim demonstrates exceptional performance with 94.7% institutional births and 63.0% full antenatal care coverage, while Nagaland lags with only 32.8% institutional deliveries. The regional average for institutional births (66.3%) falls below the national average (78.9%), indicating continued reliance on traditional birth attendants in many communities.<sup>37</sup>

Maternal mortality trends from Sample Registration System (SRS) data show significant improvement across the region between 2001-03 and 2015-17, with Assam's Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR) declining from 490 to 229 per 100,000 live births. However, Assam's MMR remains significantly higher than the national average of 122, indicating persistent challenges.<sup>38</sup>

Contraceptive usage patterns reveal cultural specificities, with overall modern contraceptive prevalence rates in most northeastern states falling below the national average. Female sterilization, the dominant contraceptive method nationally, is less prevalent in the Northeast, while male methods (including condoms and male sterilization) show higher acceptance rates in states like Manipur and Sikkim, suggesting more balanced reproductive responsibility.<sup>39</sup>

Adolescent health indicators highlight concerns regarding early marriage and childbearing in certain communities. Teenage pregnancy rates exceed 15% in rural areas of Meghalaya and parts of Assam, contributing to adverse maternal and child health outcomes.<sup>40</sup>

## 6.2 Violence Against Women

Violence against women represents a critical indicator of gender power relations. Crime statistics and survey data reveal complex patterns of gender-based violence across northeastern states. Table 6 presents state-wise data on reported crimes against women.

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**Table 6: Reported Crimes Against Women in Northeast Indian States (2019)**

State	Total Reported Cases	Rate (per 100,000 female population)	Domestic Violence Cases (% of total)
Arunachal Pradesh	317	46.3	28.7
Assam	29,046	177.8	31.2
Manipur	293	20.9	25.6
Meghalaya	558	37.4	42.3
Mizoram	139	25.3	31.7
Nagaland	43	4.3	37.2
Sikkim	171	53.8	35.1
Tripura	1,070	57.9	44.9
<b>National</b>	<b>405,861</b>	<b>62.4</b>	<b>30.9</b>

*Source: Crime in India, National Crime Records Bureau, 2019<sup>41</sup>*

The data reveals striking variations in reported crime rates, with Assam showing significantly higher rates (177.8 per 100,000 females) compared to Nagaland's remarkably low rate (4.3). However, researchers caution that these statistics reflect reporting patterns rather than actual prevalence, with factors such as social stigma, community-based dispute resolution, and limited police accessibility affecting formal reporting.<sup>42</sup>

The National Family Health Survey-4 offers additional insights, indicating that spousal violence experienced by ever-married women ranges from 12.6% in Sikkim to 43.2% in Manipur, compared to the national average of 31.2%.<sup>23</sup> This suggests that domestic violence remains a significant issue across the region despite relatively progressive gender narratives.



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Several factors contribute to violence against women in the northeastern context:

1. Militarization and conflict creating environments conducive to sexual violence
2. Economic stress and masculine identity crisis in changing socioeconomic conditions
3. Substance abuse problems in certain communities
4. Customary laws and traditional justice systems that may discriminate against women victims
5. Limited support services for survivors, particularly in rural areas<sup>43</sup>

A distinctive aspect of gender-based violence in Northeast India relates to conflict situations. Studies document how counterinsurgency operations have generated specific forms of violence against women, including sexual violence as an instrument of power, custodial violence, and harassment during security operations.<sup>44</sup>

### 6.3 Decision-Making Regarding Health and Sexuality

Women's autonomy in health-related decision-making shows relatively higher levels compared to national averages but varies significantly across communities. According to NFHS-4, the percentage of currently married women who usually participate in household decisions about their own healthcare ranges from 73.1% in Assam to 98.2% in Mizoram, compared to the national average of 74.5%.<sup>23</sup>

Traditional practices affecting women's reproductive health persist in various communities, including:

1. Dietary restrictions during pregnancy and postpartum periods
2. Cultural expectations regarding frequent childbearing in certain communities
3. Preference for male children in communities influenced by mainland patriarchal values
4. Limited female autonomy in sexual decision-making despite public visibility<sup>45</sup>

HIV/AIDS vulnerability presents a serious concern in states like Manipur, Nagaland, and Mizoram, which have recorded higher prevalence rates than the national average. Gender power imbalances in sexual relationships, limited negotiation power regarding safe sex practices, and stigma surrounding sexual health discussions contribute to women's vulnerability.<sup>46</sup>

Access to healthcare services remains constrained by geographical isolation, infrastructure limitations, and shortages of female healthcare providers in many parts of the region. Women in remote areas face particular challenges accessing reproductive and sexual health services, with distance, terrain, and transportation costs creating significant barriers.<sup>47</sup>

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These dimensions collectively highlight how women's bodily autonomy and health security remain compromised despite relatively progressive gender norms in other domains. The disparities between states and between rural and urban areas underscore the need for context-specific health interventions addressing both cultural and structural factors affecting women's health and safety.

## ***7. Traditional Institutions and Modernization: Continuity and Change***

### **7.1 Diverse Systems of Kinship and Women's Status**

Northeast India presents diverse kinship systems with varying implications for women's status and gender relations. These systems can be broadly categorized as:

1. **Matrilineal systems:** Found primarily among Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo communities in Meghalaya, these systems trace descent through the maternal line, with property inheritance passing through daughters (particularly the youngest daughter among Khasis). While providing women certain economic security, matriliney does not necessarily translate into comprehensive matriarchal authority, as decision-making often involves maternal uncles.<sup>48</sup>
2. **Patrilineal systems with traditional women's associations:** Common among Naga and Mizo communities, these systems maintain male-centered inheritance but incorporate structured spaces for women's collective action. Traditional institutions like the Mizo 'Zawlbuk' (bachelor's dormitory) and Naga 'Morung' (youth dormitory) historically demarcated gendered social spaces while simultaneously acknowledging complementarity of gender roles.<sup>49</sup>
3. **Mixed systems:** Communities like the Dimas of Assam practice duolineal systems where certain properties pass through the female line while others follow male inheritance. Several Tibeto-Burman communities maintain bilateral inheritance patterns with relatively flexible gender norms compared to mainstream Hindu practices.<sup>50</sup>
4. **Mainstream Hindu and Islamic systems:** Prevalent in the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys of Assam and parts of Tripura, these follow conventional patrilineal inheritance patterns though often with regional variations influenced by indigenous practices.<sup>51</sup>

Ethnographic research indicates that even within patrilineal systems, northeastern women traditionally held respected positions based on their productive roles, ritual knowledge, and contributions to community welfare. The concept of "complementarity rather than hierarchy" has been emphasized in

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several anthropological studies of tribal gender relations, though this interpretation has been increasingly questioned by feminist scholars highlighting power asymmetries within this complementarity.<sup>52</sup>

## 7.2 Customary Laws and Gender Rights

Customary laws governing marriage, divorce, inheritance, and property rights significantly influence women's status across northeastern communities. These unwritten traditional codes continue to operate alongside statutory laws, creating complex legal pluralism with varying gender implications.

Research on customary practices reveals significant variations in women's rights:

1. **Marriage and divorce:** While many communities traditionally permitted both men and women to initiate divorce, compensatory payments often disadvantage women. Bride price practices (prevalent among various tribal groups) symbolize women's productive value but have been criticized for potentially commodifying women. Practices like khap (bride kidnapping) among some Arunachal communities represent more problematic traditions that undermine women's consent.<sup>53</sup>
2. **Property rights:** Even in matrilineal Meghalaya, women's property control is increasingly contested with modernization. Most tribal customary laws in patrilineal communities restrict women's inheritance of ancestral property. Women's traditional usufruct rights over land have weakened with the transition to individual property systems and commercial agriculture.<sup>54</sup>
3. **Political participation:** Most traditional governance institutions exclude women from decision-making bodies. Village councils, tribal hohos (assemblies), and customary courts remain predominantly male institutions, with women's participation limited to separate women's organizations with advisory rather than decisive roles.<sup>55</sup>

The interaction between customary and statutory laws creates particular challenges for women seeking justice. Under Article 371(A) of the Constitution, Nagaland's tribal customary laws receive special protection from parliamentary legislation affecting religious and social practices, customary law, and civil and criminal justice administration involving tribal decisions. Similar provisions apply to other northeastern states, creating potential conflicts with constitutional gender equality guarantees.<sup>56</sup>

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Women's organizations across the region have increasingly challenged gender-discriminatory aspects of customary practices while attempting to preserve culturally valuable traditions. This negotiation between cultural preservation and gender justice represents a core tension in contemporary gender relations in the region.<sup>57</sup>

### 7.3 Impact of Modernization and Socioeconomic Change

Modernization processes have transformed traditional gender relations through multiple pathways, creating new opportunities alongside new vulnerabilities for northeastern women:

1. **Education and employment:** Expanded educational access has increased women's capabilities and aspirations. However, the transition from traditional agricultural and forest-based livelihoods (where women held recognized productive roles) to formal employment markets (where they face structural disadvantages) has generated complex outcomes for women's economic status.<sup>58</sup>
2. **Urbanization:** Growing urban centers have created new spaces with potentially more egalitarian norms but also new forms of vulnerability. Urban migration has particularly complex implications for tribal women navigating between traditional community protections and modern individualistic social structures.<sup>59</sup>
3. **Commercialization:** Market integration has monetized traditional economies, sometimes eroding women's control over production and resources. For instance, the shift from subsistence agriculture to cash crops has often marginalized women's traditional agricultural knowledge and control.<sup>60</sup>
4. **Religious conversion:** Christianity's spread across tribal areas has had ambivalent gender implications—challenging certain discriminatory practices while sometimes introducing new patriarchal elements through Victorian-influenced gender ideologies.<sup>61</sup>
5. **Political mobilization:** Identity-based political movements have often subordinated gender concerns to ethnic solidarity imperatives. While women actively participate in these movements, gender-specific concerns frequently remain secondary to broader ethnic agendas.<sup>62</sup>
6. **Media and connectivity:** Expanded media access and digital connectivity have exposed women to alternative gender models and facilitated new forms of networking and solidarity. However,

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increased connectivity has also introduced new vulnerabilities, including cyber harassment and exposure to demeaning gender stereotypes.<sup>63</sup>

These changes have produced what some scholars term "gendered modernities"—synthesis formations that combine elements of traditional gender systems with contemporary influences. The outcomes vary significantly across communities, classes, and urban-rural divides, creating complex patterns of both empowerment and disempowerment.<sup>64</sup>

A particularly significant trend is the changing nature of women's collectives. Traditional women's organizations focused on community welfare are increasingly engaging with rights-based discourses and connecting with broader feminist movements while maintaining culturally specific approaches to gender justice.<sup>65</sup>

## 8. Comparative Analysis and Regional Variations

### 8.1 Inter-State Variations in Women's Status

A comparative analysis across northeastern states reveals significant variations in women's status indicators. Table 7 presents a composite picture based on selected indicators.

**Table 7: Comparative Women's Status Indicators Across Northeast Indian States**

State	Female Literacy (%)	Female Work Participation (%)	Women MLAs (%)	Sex Ratio	Institutional Births (%)
Arunachal Pradesh	59.6	35.4	5.0	938	52.3
Assam	67.3	22.5	6.3	958	70.6
Manipur	73.2	39.9	3.3	992	69.1
Meghalaya	73.8	32.7	5.0	989	51.4

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State	Female Literacy (%)	Female Work Participation (%)	Women MLAs (%)	Sex Ratio	Institutional Births (%)
Mizoram	89.4	36.2	0.0	976	79.7
Nagaland	76.7	44.7	0.0	931	32.8
Sikkim	76.4	38.6	9.4	890	94.7
Tripura	83.1	23.6	8.3	960	79.9

Sources: Census 2011<sup>7</sup>, Election Commission of India<sup>26</sup>, NFHS-4<sup>23</sup>

This comparative data highlights several patterns:

1. **Educational-political representation disconnect:** States with high female literacy like Mizoram (89.4%) and Nagaland (76.7%) paradoxically show zero women's representation in state legislatures, challenging simplistic correlations between education and political empowerment.
2. **Economic participation variations:** Nagaland leads in female work participation (44.7%) despite cultural restrictions in certain domains, while Assam, despite its relative economic development, shows much lower rates (22.5%).
3. **Health service disparities:** Institutional delivery rates range from Sikkim's 94.7% to Nagaland's 32.8%, reflecting significant variations in healthcare access and cultural preferences.
4. **Matriliny-development disconnect:** Meghalaya, despite its matrilineal traditions, does not consistently outperform patrilineal states across development indicators, showing middling performance in female literacy (73.8%), work participation (32.7%), and particularly poor institutional delivery rates (51.4%).

These variations defy simple generalizations about northeastern women's status and highlight the need for state-specific policies addressing particular challenges in each context. The data also challenges assumptions about direct correlations between traditional cultural systems and contemporary development outcomes.<sup>66</sup>

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## 8.2 Rural-Urban Disparities

Rural-urban comparisons reveal significant disparities across most indicators, though with some distinctive patterns unlike those observed nationally. Table 8 presents selected indicators disaggregated by rural-urban location.

**Table 8: Rural-Urban Disparities in Women's Status Indicators in Northeast India**

Indicator	Rural	Urban	Gap (percentage points)
Female Literacy (%)	70.7	85.9	15.2
Female Work Participation Rate (%)	38.1	24.3	-13.8*
Women who experienced spousal violence (%)	34.8	25.3	-9.5*
Women with 10+ years of schooling (%)	30.5	60.3	29.8
Women with bank accounts they use (%)	53.3	70.2	16.9

\*Negative gap indicates higher rates in rural areas

Sources: Census 2011<sup>7</sup>, NFHS-4<sup>23</sup>, Labour Bureau 2019<sup>67</sup>

Several notable patterns emerge:

1. Rural women show higher workforce participation than urban women across most northeastern states, contrasting with national patterns. This reflects the continued importance of agriculture and allied activities where women play substantial roles in rural northeastern economies.<sup>68</sup>
2. Educational disparities remain significant, with urban women twice as likely to have completed secondary education compared to rural women.
3. Financial inclusion shows substantial urban advantage, reflecting better banking infrastructure and employment formalization in urban areas.

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4. Domestic violence rates are higher in rural areas across most states, potentially reflecting less exposure to progressive gender norms and more limited support services.

These disparities highlight how modernization processes have unfolded unevenly across geographical locations, creating distinct challenges for rural and urban women. Urban migration increasingly represents an empowerment strategy for rural women seeking educational and economic opportunities, though urban contexts present their own gender-specific challenges including higher living costs, housing insecurity, and weaker community support networks.<sup>69</sup>

### 8.3 Ethnic and Religious Variations

Northeast India's extraordinary ethnic and religious diversity creates complex patterns in women's status across different communities. While comprehensive comparative data disaggregated by ethnicity is limited, available studies and surveys reveal several patterns:

1. **Scheduled Tribe (ST) women** in the region generally show higher workforce participation rates (41.4%) compared to non-tribal women (26.7%), reflecting their traditional productive roles in tribal economies. However, their concentration in the informal sector with limited social security remains a concern.<sup>70</sup>
2. **Religious variations** are significant across several indicators. Christian women generally show higher educational attainment than Hindu or Muslim women in the region. Muslim women across northeastern states demonstrate lower workforce participation rates, reflecting both cultural factors and socioeconomic disadvantages.<sup>71</sup>
3. **Hill-plains divisions** create distinctive patterns within states. In Assam, hill tribal women show different indicator profiles compared to plains tribal women, who in turn differ from non-tribal women in the plains. These variations reflect not only cultural differences but also historical development patterns and geographical access to services.<sup>72</sup>
4. **Tea garden communities** (Adivasis of central Indian origin) in Assam represent a particularly vulnerable group, with women facing multiple disadvantages including lower educational attainment, high maternal mortality, and exploitative labor conditions in plantation economies.<sup>73</sup>



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These intersectional variations highlight how gender interacts with ethnicity, religion, and class to produce specific configurations of advantage and disadvantage. The diversity of women's experiences across communities challenges both mainstream Indian feminism (which often overlooks northeastern specificities) and regional ethnic discourses (which sometimes subsume gender concerns under ethnic solidarity imperatives).<sup>74</sup>

## 9. Policy Frameworks and Interventions

### 9.1 State-Level Gender Policies and Programs

Northeastern states have implemented various policies and programs addressing women's needs, though with varying degrees of commitment and effectiveness. Key policy areas include:

1. **Economic empowerment initiatives:** Several states have established women-focused livelihood programs building on traditional skills. Assam's Kanaklata Mahila Sabalakaran Yojana provides financial assistance to women's self-help groups, while Meghalaya's Women's Economic Empowerment through Financial Inclusion program focuses on rural women entrepreneurs.<sup>75</sup>
2. **Educational interventions:** Gender-specific educational initiatives include Arunachal Pradesh's scheme for girls' hostels in remote areas, Assam's free higher education for girl students from low-income families, and scholarship programs for tribal girls across several states. Nagaland's commendable improvement in female literacy rates reflects successful educational interventions despite cultural barriers.<sup>76</sup>
3. **Health-focused programs:** States have implemented region-specific adaptations of national health schemes. Manipur's community health initiatives engaging traditional birth attendants alongside modern healthcare providers represent innovative approaches to improving maternal health in culturally appropriate ways.<sup>77</sup>
4. **Anti-violence measures:** Several states have established all-women police stations, though coverage remains limited primarily to urban areas. Meghalaya's integrated support centers for women affected by violence provide multi-sectoral services including medical care, police assistance, legal aid, and psychosocial support.<sup>78</sup>

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5. **Political empowerment:** Despite constitutional provisions, implementation of women's reservation in local governance bodies remains uneven across northeastern states. Sikkim leads in promoting women's political participation through capacity-building programs and incentives for political parties fielding women candidates.<sup>79</sup>

Analysis of budgetary allocations reveals significant variations in states' financial commitments to gender-specific programs. Gender budget statements remain rudimentary or nonexistent in several northeastern states, limiting systematic gender-responsive resource allocation.<sup>80</sup>

## 9.2 Civil Society Initiatives and Women's Movements

Northeastern India has a vibrant landscape of women's organizations and civil society initiatives addressing gender concerns. These range from traditional women's associations focusing on community welfare to explicitly feminist organizations challenging structural gender inequalities. Key actors include:

1. **Indigenous women's organizations:** Groups like the Naga Mothers' Association (NMA), Meira Paibis in Manipur, and All Bodo Women's Welfare Federation combine traditional moral authority with contemporary rights discourses. These organizations have been particularly active in anti-alcohol campaigns, conflict resolution, and challenging militarization.<sup>81</sup>
2. **NGOs with gender focus:** Organizations like the North East Network, Foundation for Social Transformation, and Impulse NGO Network implement programs addressing women's health, economic empowerment, and violence prevention while conducting gender-sensitive research and advocacy.<sup>82</sup>
3. **Academic women's studies centers:** Institutional spaces at universities in Assam, Manipur, and Mizoram have contributed to regional gender scholarship, challenging both mainstream Indian feminist frameworks and traditional ethnic narratives through location-specific gender analysis.<sup>83</sup>
4. **Professional women's associations:** Groups representing women in specific sectors (agriculture, handloom, entrepreneurship) have emerged as important platforms for economic advocacy and skill development, particularly in states like Assam and Manipur.<sup>84</sup>

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These diverse actors employ various strategies including grassroots mobilization, legal advocacy, capacity building, and knowledge production. A significant achievement has been developing approaches that address gender concerns while remaining sensitive to regional cultural specificities, thereby countering the perception that gender equality is a "Western" or "mainland Indian" imposition.<sup>85</sup>

### 9.3 Implementation Challenges and Future Directions

Despite progressive policies and active civil society engagement, implementation of gender-responsive interventions faces several challenges:

1. **Geographical constraints:** The region's difficult terrain and scattered settlements create logistical challenges for service delivery, particularly affecting rural and remote women's access to health, education, and protection services.<sup>86</sup>
2. **Resource limitations:** Most northeastern states face fiscal constraints limiting investments in social infrastructure. Dependence on central funding often results in implementing standardized national schemes without adequate adaptation to regional specificities.<sup>87</sup>
3. **Capacity gaps:** Limited technical capacity for gender-responsive planning, implementation, and monitoring at institutional levels undermines program effectiveness. Gender sensitization of bureaucracy and service providers remains inadequate across most states.<sup>88</sup>
4. **Conflict impacts:** Ongoing conflicts and militarization in parts of the region disrupt development interventions and create specific security concerns for women. Peace-building processes have largely excluded women's systematic participation despite their active roles in conflict mitigation.<sup>89</sup>
5. **Coordination challenges:** Fragmentation among government departments and between government and civil society initiatives limits synergistic approaches to complex gender issues requiring multi-sectoral responses.<sup>90</sup>

**Future policy directions that emerge from this analysis include:**

1. Developing contextually appropriate gender indicators reflecting northeastern specificities rather than applying standardized national frameworks

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2. Strengthening women's representation in peace processes and security sector governance
3. Creating legal frameworks harmonizing gender equality principles with protection of beneficial cultural practices
4. Investing in gender-responsive infrastructure addressing women's specific mobility and security needs
5. Supporting women's collective enterprises building on traditional skills while accessing contemporary markets
6. Engaging men and traditional institutions in gender equality initiatives through culturally resonant approaches.<sup>91</sup>

## 10. Conclusion

This comprehensive analysis of secondary data reveals that women's status in Northeast India represents a complex mosaic defying simple characterization. The research identifies several key patterns and conclusions:

First, northeastern women's status exhibits remarkable diversity across states, communities, and rural-urban locations, reflecting the region's heterogeneous sociocultural landscape. This diversity cautions against generalizations about "northeastern women" as a monolithic category and highlights the need for contextually specific understanding and interventions.

Second, the data reveals significant paradoxes in gender indicators across domains. Women's relatively high educational attainment and workforce participation coexist with minimal political representation. Cultural respect for women's productive roles contrasts with persistent violence and health vulnerabilities. These contradictions reflect how gender relations are embedded in complex social systems where progress in one domain does not automatically translate to others.

Third, the intersection of tradition and modernity creates distinctive challenges for northeastern women. Traditional systems provided certain protections and recognitions that are sometimes eroded by modernization processes without being replaced by effective contemporary protections. Simultaneously, modernization offers new opportunities that traditional systems restricted. Women navigate these tensions

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daily, creating hybrid adaptations that selectively preserve beneficial traditions while embracing empowering changes.

Fourth, women's collective agency remains a powerful force in northeastern societies despite structural constraints. From traditional women's associations to contemporary feminist organizations, northeastern women have consistently organized to address community welfare and gender-specific concerns. These collective actions represent important social capital for addressing continuing gender challenges.

Fifth, policy frameworks require greater sensitivity to northeastern specificities rather than applying standardized national approaches. Gender interventions most likely to succeed are those recognizing the region's unique historical, cultural, and socioeconomic context while addressing universal gender justice principles.

The research highlights how women's status remains deeply embedded in culturally specific traditions while being simultaneously transformed by contemporary socioeconomic changes. This dynamic interaction creates both opportunities and vulnerabilities that require nuanced understanding and responsive policies. Future research directions should include more disaggregated data collection, participatory methodologies centering women's lived experiences, and comparative studies examining successful interventions across diverse northeastern contexts.

As northeastern societies continue navigating complex social changes, women's status will remain a critical indicator of how successfully traditional values of communal welfare can be harmonized with contemporary principles of individual rights and gender equality. The distinctive contributions of northeastern gender systems—particularly their emphasis on women's economic agency, community solidarity, and complementary gender roles—offer valuable insights for broader gender equality discourses while acknowledging areas requiring transformation.

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