

Political Participation of Garo Women in Legislative Assembly Elections in Meghalaya

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Abstract: *On December 20, 1952, the UN General Assembly was established and adopted the Convention on Women's Political Rights on March 3, 1953. Article 21 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights ensures all individuals have the right to vote and use public services. In addition, the UN Convention says that women have the same rights as men when it comes to voting, competing for elections, and holding public office, regardless of their race, sex, religion, etc. Despite the fact that men and women enjoyed equal political participation, women were not able to get what they deserved because no real effort was made to encourage them to get involved in politics. Meghalaya, a predominantly tribal state in the North Eastern region of India, is comprised of three tribes, namely the Garo, the Khasi, and the Jaintia, being a matrilineal society in which the right to inherit family property passes to the daughter, children take their mother's family name, and residents after marriage are uxorilocal, and a society in which women are held in high regard. Women in Meghalaya are renowned for their diligence and effectiveness. Garo women also played a vital role in Meghalaya's society. It examines the political participation of Garo women in Meghalaya's Legislative Assembly elections. According to the study, very few women participated and were elected to the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly. Historically, Garo women were not allowed to take part in decision-making in traditional political institutions. The study showed that women's representation was not very important in state politics. Nonetheless, one significant point in this context that researchers are considering is the problem of Garo women participating in politics. This study is taken from 1972 to the 2023 Legislative Assembly Elections in Meghalaya.*

Keywords: Garo women's electoral participation; Elections; matrilineal society

1. Introduction

Political participation has been required for effective democratic governance. Women's active participation in politics can ensure the true spirit of a democratic system. If women remain the largest excluded group, the fight for gender equality cannot be won. Women's active role in the political system is the most important factor in a more democratic government. As a result, political participation by women is an important aspect of empowerment. The women's section can overcome discrimination in the sex-segregated character of society by increasing their involvement. The participation of all citizens is crucial to the success of a democratic government.

The global percentage of women represented in legislatures is only 16%. Women as UN ambassadors are only 9%, and women as cabinet members are only 7%. Only 7 percent of the world's more than 190 nations have female heads of state (presidents or prime ministers); only 9 percent have female UN ambassadors; and only 7 percent have female cabinet ministers. Despite development initiatives and plans to empower women in decision-making, only a few nations around the globe have made significant progress in their political representation. Rwanda has the largest proportion of women in its legislature, with 48.8 percent in 2003 and 56.3% in 2008. Sweden ranked second with 45.3% of female legislators in 2003 and 46.4% in 2008. At the same time, the legislatures of eleven countries, including four countries in the Middle East, do not have any women representatives. Some small island nations in the Asia-Pacific region, including the Solomon Islands, Micronesia, Nauru, Paulu, Tonga, and Tuvalu, do not have women in their legislatures.

Saudi Arabia has not yet granted women the right to vote, and women are not often seen in prominent government positions.

Although there was a movement demanding women's suffrage in India as early as the 1920s—during British rule—women did not gain the right to vote until after India gained independence. Article 326 of the Indian Constitution ensures women's right to vote, while Article 325 forbids discrimination in voter registration based on gender, race, religion, or any other personal characteristic. This means that women in 20th century now only have same political rights as men. Sarojini Naidu was the first woman governor and Indian National Congress president.

The percentage of women elected to the Legislative Assembly in Meghalaya is quite low. The degree of participation by women during assembly elections to the Meghalaya State Legislative Assembly in 1972 and 2023 provides insight into women's representations in the 60-seat legislature and their level of interest in participating in the political system. This study tries to show how women candidates and women who have been elected to the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly have changed from the first election to the most recent one. The current analysis demonstrates that there is widespread misunderstanding regarding Meghalaya's sociopolitical reality. Because it is a matrilineal society with a stronger role for women in the family structure, it is expected that they will be more involved in social and political institutions. Nonetheless, the very low presence of women in the state's policymaking and legislative processes paints a different picture.

Meghalaya got statehood on January 21, 1972. While examining the past history of its legislative assembly, however, the representation of Garo women lags far behind. Political campaigns are still viewed as the domain of men. It appears that women are not interested in running for office, possibly because they are so ingrained in the conventional view that politics is the exclusive domain of men. From 1972 to 2023, only 21 women candidates have won one of the sixty State Assembly seats in Meghalaya so far.

Objective

The purpose of this research is to comprehend the socio-political position of Garo women in Meghalaya. The study will attempt to determine, in particular, the participation of Garo women in legislative assembly elections in Meghalaya.

2. Methodology

The current research work is adopted historical, documentary and descriptive analytical method. The current study primarily deals with Garo women's participation in state-level decision-making processes in Meghalaya. The study depends primarily on secondary sources, such as books, journals, articles, the Meghalaya election handbook, and online resources.

Women's Participation in the Legislative Assembly of Meghalaya

The Indian Constitution provides all of its citizens with equal rights and opportunities, regardless of caste, creed, religion, or gender. The Government of India Act of 1935 made provisions for the political representation of women by allocating a certain number of seats to the Shillong constituency in the Assam Legislative Assembly. Because of this act, women now have the right to contest elections for general seats. The first two women to be elected as members of the Assembly were Berlina Diengdoh and Mavis Dunn Lyngdoh, who contested for the reserved seats in the 1937 election. In the North-Eastern states, she was the first Khasi woman to hold the position of Cabinet Minister. She worked for Muhammad Saadulla's government from 1939 to 1941. There were four women who contested the 1946 election. Mrs Bonniely Khongmen was one of the Shillong Women's Seat candidates.

The second general election could not be held in 1942 because of the Second World War. It took place in 1946, and only five women contested this election. In India, the first general election was held in 1952. This election allocated four members to the Garo Hills and five seats to the United Khasi-Jaintia Hills. In the Tura seat, no woman contested the election. There are two female candidates for the Khasi-Jaintia Hills seat. The second general election was held in 1957. There are no female candidates from Tura's constituency. Out of the five seats in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills constituencies, only one woman contested the election. In the Third and Fourth General Elections, held in 1962 and 1967, respectively, no woman contested for election.

In 1970, Meghalaya became an autonomous state with its own legislature. Meghalaya's Provisional Legislative Assembly was elected indirectly. Members of the Meghalaya Autonomous State Legislative Assembly were chosen by the Electoral College, which was made up of

members of the existing District Councils. The House had a total of 41 members. There were three minority representatives and eighteen members from the Khasi Hills, four members from the Jaintia Hills, and sixteen members from the Garo Hills. In addition, not a single woman contested this election.

The 1971 North-Eastern Areas (Reorganisation) Act established the Autonomous State of Meghalaya as a separate state from Assam with its own Legislative Assembly. The Meghalaya Legislative Assembly is a unicameral legislature consisting of 60 seats. 55 of these seats are allocated for ST candidates, while the remaining 5 seats are for general candidates. There are 36 Legislative Assembly constituencies in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills divisions. There are 24 Legislative Assembly constituencies in the Garo Hills division. Members are directly chosen by the public for a five-year term. In this section, we shall look at women's representation in the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly from the time of statehood on January 21, 1972, till the current general election to the Legislative Assembly in 2023. The table below provides a brief overview of the number of women elected to the State Assembly from 1972 to 2023.

Table 1: Women's Participation in Meghalaya's State Legislative Assembly Elections in 1972 and 2023

Year	Total number of women's participation	Total number of women candidates elected
1972	9	1
1978	7	1
1983	8	0
1988	3	2
1993	7	1
1998	15	3
2003	14	2
2008	21	1
2013	25	4
2018	32	3
2023	35	3

Source: Meghalaya Election Handbook, website of the Chief Electoral Officer of Meghalaya.

The table above shows the total number of women's participation and the total number of elected candidates for assembly elections from 1972 to 2023. The Meghalaya Legislative Assembly conducted its first general election on March 9, 1972, with 60 seats. There were nine female candidates out of sixty seats, and one woman was elected to the State Legislative Assembly. Women have stepped up to take an active role in political participation. It is disheartening to see that none of the female candidates won any seats in 1983.

According to Table 1, not more than four women were elected to the state legislature between 1972 and 2023. In the most recent 2023 Assembly elections, women's access to political participation and higher positions in the political structure increased. However, when examining the number of women elected to the Legislative Assembly, it is disheartening to see that there are currently only three women candidates in the Assembly's sixty seats. In Meghalaya, it's clear that women have not been accepted as policymakers and decision-makers.

Garó Women's Role in Political Participation

Garó Hills became part of Meghalaya's autonomous state in 1971. The matrilineal law of succession governs society in the Garó Hills because they do not have a panchayat system. This means that property is passed down through the female line, and any Garó daughter remains in the custody of the family's property. The total number of seats in Garó Hills was 24. The number of Garó women elected to the Legislative Assembly in Meghalaya was quite low. The degree of participation by Garó women during assembly elections to the Meghalaya State Legislative Assembly in 1972 and 2023 provides insight into women's

representations in the 60-seat legislature and their level of interest in participating in the political system.

Garó Women in Meghalaya are active members of both national and regional political parties. During elections, they take part in political campaigns, such as processions, public gatherings, and delivering public speeches. They also use their right to vote, and in some polling places, there are more women voters than men. Despite having more authority and independence than their counterparts in other regions of the country, and despite having freedom in their social and economic lives, Garó women in Meghalaya experience political persecution.

Table 2: Names of Garó women participated in Legislative Assembly elections between 1972 and 2023

	NAMES	PARTY	CONSTITUENCY	STATUS
1972	Miriam D. Shira	IND	Rongram	Loss
	Percylina Marak	AHL	Rongram	Win
	Herilla B. Sangna	IND	Tura	Loss
1978	Miriam D. Shira	IND	Songsak	Win
	Percylina R. Marak	INC	Rongram	Loss
	Fridina Marak	IND	Tura	Loss
1983	Miriam D. Shira	AHL	Songsak	Loss
1988	Miriam D. Shira	IND	Rajabala	Win
	Findina K. Marak	AHL(A)	Rangsakona	Loss
1993	Miriam Shira	IND	Rajabala	Loss
	Enila Shira	BJP	Tura	Loss
1998	Debora C Marak	INC	Rongrenggiri	Win
	Miriam D. Shira	IND	Songsak	Loss
	Bijeta Daring	IND	Rajabala	Loss
2003	Debora C Marak	INC	Rongrenggiri	Win
	Bindu Momin	BJP	Rongjeng	Loss
	Anilla D. Shira	BJP	Songsak	Loss
	Stella Marie A Sangma	IND	Rangsakona	Loss
2008	Gentilla R. Marak	IND	Baghmara	Loss
	Florence Sangma	UDP	Baghmara	Loss
	Debora C Marak	INC	Rongrenggiri	Loss
	Lenitha Sangma	MDP	Rongrenggiri	Loss
	Arlene N. Sangma	UDP	Chokpot	Loss
	Sophie Bensinda Marak	INC	Chokpot	Loss
2013	Fardina C. Marak	IND	Songsak	Loss
	Sabina D. Sangma	IND	Rongjeng	Loss
	Debora C Marak	INC	Williamnagar	Win
	Susana D. Sangma	UDP	Phulbari	Loss
	Aderina K. Sangma	IND	South Tura	Loss
	Dikkanchi D. Shira	INC	Mahendraganj	Win
	Silme Ch. Marak	IND	Mahendraganj	Loss
	Mafiara T. Sangma	NCP	Mahendraganj	Loss
	Arlene N. Sangma	INC	Chokpot	Loss
Bluebell R. Sangma	NCP	Chokpot	Loss	
2018	Martha R. Marak	IND	Ranikor	Loss
	Fardina C. Marak	IND	Songsak	Loss
	Sandhya R. Marak	IND	Songsak	Loss
	Debora C Marak	INC	William Nagar	Loss
	Luchina R. Marak	IND	Tikrikilla	Loss
	Ferlin A Sangma	NPEP	Selsella	Loss
	June Eliana R. Marak	IND	Dadenggre	Loss
	Agatha K. Sangma	NPEP	South Tura	Win
	Aanamika Jessirella G. Momin	IND	South Tura	Loss
	Dr. Pilne A. Sangma	IND	Rangsakona	Loss
	Dikkanchi D. Shira	INC	Mahendraganj	Win
	Mafiara T. Sangma	GNC	Mahendraganj	Loss
	Sadhiarani M. Sangma	INC	Gambagre	Loss
	Moromi K. Marak	IND	Dalu	Loss
Bluebell R. Sangma	IND	Chokpot	Loss	
2023	Miami D. Shira	AITC	Ampati	Win

Uttora Guri Sangma	INC	Ampati	Loss
Sadhiarani M Sangma	AITC	Gambegre	Loss
Dr. Pilne A. Sangma	UDP	North Tura	Loss
Bina Rosaline A. Sangma	JD (United)	North Tura	Loss
Debora C Marak	INC	William Nagar	Loss
Riya Sangma	BJP	Jirang	Loss
Serimina D. Marak	RPI(A)	Jirang	Loss
Sarenni Marak	RPI(Athawale)	Songsak	Loss
Ferline C.A. Sangma	BJP	Selsella	Loss
Dikkanchi D. Shira	AITC	Mahendraganj	Loss

Source: Statistical Report on Meghalaya Legislative Assembly Elections during 1972–2023

The table above only includes Garo women who contested in the Meghalaya Assembly elections. In Meghalaya's 1972 Assembly election, just three Garo women contested out of the 60 seats. They are Miriam D. Shira, Percylina Marak, and Herilla B. Sangma. In 2018, the total number of Garo Women contestants in the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly Election was 15, which is the highest number of contestants contested from Garo Hills till date. In the 1983, 1993, and 2008 elections, the total number of Garo contestants was 9, out of which none of the Garo women won any seats in the Assembly Elections. So far, the Garo women have won only two seats in the Meghalaya Assembly elections over the past few years.

3. Conclusion

Meghalaya have conducted the Eleventh Legislative Assembly Elections till the 2020. Out of the total of 3,218 candidates who contested for election in Meghalaya, 176 of them were women. Only 21 of these 176 women have been elected so far. In the following years, there were a total of 3218 contestants in Meghalaya, but only 60 of them were women from the Garo tribes. So far, only ten Garo women have been elected out of a total of 60 Garo women who participated in the elections. Additionally, it is evident that Garo women are becoming more active in state politics with each passing year. In 1972, there were just three candidates, and by 2018, there were 15. Only one or two candidates are chosen in each election, and the number of winners is still very low.

In Meghalaya, the Garo women were ignored for taking part in the state's political affairs. Mrs. Percylina Marak became the first Garo woman to serve in the 1972 Assembly Election in Meghalaya. On the other hand, Mrs. Deborah Marak became the first female Garo Deputy Chief Minister of Meghalaya in 1998. Therefore, discussion and decision-making, management and planning, formulating policies, and performing management duties are still seen as being the domain of men. As a result, Garo women must understand how important it is for them to be part of the state's political system. Additionally, society must recognise that Garo women are just as capable as Garo males in this area and should be provided equal opportunities. Garo women in Meghalaya are enthusiastic participants in the women's wings of a number of political parties, but no party leaders have emerged. As a result, the political system in Meghalaya must motivate Garo women to participate by providing party seats to women.

Garo women in Meghalaya are diligent and truthful; if these traits had been used at the decision-making level and if they had asserted themselves in politics and been represented in various legislative bodies, the role of women in Meghalaya politics would have been different. To maintain peace and development in Meghalaya, it is vital to have Garo women in positions of authority. Countries, where there are more women in political positions of power and leadership, tend to be more open, responsive, equal, and democratic.

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