

# The Historical, Political and Socio-Cultural Factors Influencing Women's Political Participation in Village Councils, Meghalaya

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## Abstract

Women's participation in village councils in East Khasi Hills, Meghalaya, reflects a complex balance between matrilineal traditions and male-dominated political authority. Although Khasi women inherit lineage and property, their involvement in formal decision-making bodies such as the Dorbar Shnong remains limited. This paper examines the historical, political, and socio-cultural factors influencing women's representation in these local institutions. Drawing on secondary sources, the study highlights how customary norms, colonial interventions, legal developments, and changing socio-economic conditions shape women's roles in community governance. The discussion also explores emerging debates and reforms aimed at expanding gender inclusion.

**Keywords:** Women's participation; Dorbar Shnong; Khasi matriliney; gender and governance; East Khasi Hills.

## Introduction

Women's political participation in the East Khasi Hills occupies a unique position within the broader discourse on gender and governance in India. The Khasi community is globally recognised for its matrilineal system, where lineage, surnames, and rights over ancestral property are transferred through women. Khasi self-governance has historically been rooted in clan-based systems, with the Dorbar Shnong functioning as a key site of political deliberation and leadership (Warjri, 2025; Lyngdoh, 2014). Although the Khasi society is matrilineal in lineage and inheritance, leadership roles—particularly within the Dorbar—have remained overwhelmingly male. Traditional norms and ritual customs continue to influence decision-making spaces, restricting women's entry into positions of authority (Laloo, 2014). This paradox has generated sustained academic interest, revealing how gendered power relations are shaped by a combination of customary law, cultural expectations, and long-standing political practices that privilege men's public roles. The legacy of colonial administration further reinforced male representation in local councils, while religion, evolving social identities, and economic transitions continue to influence participation patterns. In recent years, debates over women's inclusion in grassroots governance have gained momentum, prompted by civil society activism, legal interventions, and broader shifts in democratic engagement. Understanding these converging factors is crucial for analysing the structural constraints that limit women's presence in decision-making spaces, as well as the emerging opportunities that could reshape political participation in the region.

**Study Methods:**

This article discusses on the historical, political and socio-economic aspects of village councils that influence women’s participation in the councils. Data are collected by personal interviews, as well as secondary sources. For personal interview samples are identified purposively to get rich data on traditions and history. Books, journals and newspaper articles are searched for secondary sources. The secondary sources are listed in a table and referred while the personal interview data are explained along with the secondary data thematically in the results section.

**Results and Data Analysis**

The data collected are listed in the following table, citing sources. The findings are thematically analysed and discussed as follows.

**Table 1: Themes, Extracted Facts, Sources, and Implications for Women’s Participation in Dorbar Shnong**

Theme	Extracted Facts	Sources	Implications for Women’s Participation
1. Historical Evolution	Dorbar Shnong evolved from decentralised clan-based councils; British colonialism introduced Rangbah Shnong titles; post-independence integration under the Sixth Schedule and Panchayati Raj	Warjri, 2025; Lyngdoh, 2014; Highland Post, 2024	Historical male dominance persists; colonial/post-colonial changes limited women’s formal authority
2. Customary Norms & Matrilineality	Matrilineal inheritance; male-exclusive political roles; only 4/13 Dorbar Shnongs allow women in executive committees	Laloo, 2014; Highland Post, 2024	Women have socio-economic influence but limited political power; matrilineality does not ensure political participation
3. Legal & Political Influences	KHADC formalises Dorbar Shnongs; Sixth Schedule protects autonomy; 73rd Amendment impacts partial inclusion; enforcement challenges exist	Warjri, 2025; Laloo, 2014	Legal recognition exists but gender inclusion remains slow and uneven
4. Religious & Cultural Institutions	Lyngdohs enforce rituals; Dorbar meetings in ling Syiem; women participate in supportive roles; ritual taboos restrict participation	Highland Post, 2024	Religious norms institutionalise male dominance; cultural taboos limit women’s formal political entry
5. Women’s Collective Action & Organisations	Lympung ki Seng Kynthei mobilises women for social, cultural, and developmental issues; advocacy through campaigns and petitions	Warjri, 2025	Collective action provides an alternative political voice but operates outside formal governance; limited structural impact
6. Economic Roles &	Land inheritance via the matrilineal line; the Dorbar controls resource	Lyngdoh, 2014;	Economic agency exists, but male control over public

Resource Access	allocation; male authority dominates economic decisions	Highland Post, 2024	resources limits translation to political leadership
7. Leadership Models & Local Power Structures	Rangbah Shnong, Rangbah Dong, Lyngdohs, Basans hold leadership; male-exclusive executive committees; patronage networks reinforce hierarchy	Warjri, 2025; Laloo, 2014	Leadership pathways are gender-exclusive; male hegemony persists; structural space for women is restricted

## Key Findings and Analysis

### 1. Historical Evolution of the Dorbar Shnong

**Legacy of Folk Democracy:** The concept of “folk democracy” is central to Khasi traditional governance: the Dorbar Shnong (village council) is not merely a relic, but a living institution rooted in collective responsibility, communal care, and consensus. Warjri (2025) describes how the Khasi system historically emphasises caring for the elderly, children, and the underprivileged, embedding social welfare into political practices. (highlandpost.com)

**Colonial Disruption and Legal Reinterpretation:** Colonial intervention significantly altered the traditional political landscape. British administrators codified customary laws to fit their legal frameworks, thereby undermining indigenous norms. (highlandpost.com)

Warjri (2025) argues that customary land-holding, once communal and sacred, was gradually converted into private property under colonial and post-colonial regimes, weakening the collective foundations of Khasi folk democracy. (highlandpost.com)

**Governance Structure and Resilience:** Despite modernisation, the Dorbar Shnong continues to play a role in local affairs. Highland Post accounts note that village councils still mediate between government agencies and community needs, showing adaptability. (highlandpost.com). The article also mentions Ka Synjuk Ki Rangbah Shnong (a forum of headmen formed in 1989) as an example of how traditional governance structures have reorganised to remain relevant in the modern polity.

**Clanship, Representation, and Administrative Tiers:** According to Warjri (2025), Khasi traditional democracy is deeply layered: the maternal clan (Dorbar Iing), the clan council (Dorbar Kur), the village council (Dorbar Shnong), and higher territorial councils (Dorbar Rajj / Dorbar Hima) all function in tandem. This tiered system historically ensured local self-governance and broad participation, though colonial and modern pressures have reshaped its functions.

**Modern Challenges and Institutional Erosion:** The Dorbar Shnong faces contemporary challenges: globalisation, migration, and political self-interest have weakened its communal ethics. Warjri (2025) warns that traditional values are eroded as modern elites exploit institutions, shifting the Dorbar from a platform of shared welfare to a mechanism of privilege.

Furthermore, there is pressure to formalise and modernise Dorbar procedures — for example, calls for more inclusive representation (beyond men, beyond clans) and for mechanisms that combine tradition with democratic practice.

### 2. Customary Norms and Matrilineality

**Matrilineal Kinship vs. Male Political Power:** Khasi society is matrilineal: descent, inheritance, and lineage pass through the mother and her clan. However, despite this matrilineal structure, political decision-making in institutions like the Dorbar Shnong is traditionally male-dominated. Lyngdoh (in

Revisiting Traditional Institutions in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills) explains that political representatives in the Dorbar Shnong, Dorbar Kur, and Dorbar Hima are male clan members acting on behalf of their maternal clan (“kur”) rather than purely as individuals.

The role of the kni (maternal uncle) is especially central: he often represents the mother’s house in both religious and political matters. Lyngdoh notes that the kni is the one who leads the family/clan council and participates in decision-making, rather than women themselves.

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**Limited Formal Representation of Women:** According to an IJCRT study, Khasi women are typically excluded from formal leadership roles in the Dorbar Shnong; for example, they cannot become Rangbah Shnong (village headman) because the term “Rangbah” has a strong male connotation, and customary practices restrict election to men. The same study also reports that the youngest daughter often inherits property (“ka-khadduh”), showing that women hold economic power in the matrilineal system, but are excluded politically.

**Customary Flexibility, But Rare Exceptions:** Highland Post reports (Warjri, 2025) that while male representation is the norm in Dorbar councils, there is a customary provision: a “mature female” may represent her family in Dorbar if no eligible male is available. (highlandpost.com) In a more recent Highland Post piece, Warjri argues that though tradition tends to favor men, women of “mature age and sound mind” are not entirely excluded; they may lead or represent in their Dorbar if conditions warrant, suggesting a degree of customary fluidity. (highlandpost.com)

**Social and Gender Roles:** Research on gender relations in Khasi matrilineal society (e.g. a study published on PMC) shows that although household and kinship power lies with women, public political authority remains with men. In focus groups, both men and women admit that men dominate community decisions, even in a matrilineal system, because of the customary role of male elders. The same study also documents that women play important roles in the economy (homegardens, seed selection, postharvest processing), but their role in community governance (e.g., Dorbar Shnong) is limited to “passive participation” historically.

**Social Critique and Gender Disparities:** According to a Times of India report, despite matriliney, political positions in Dorbar Shnong remain heavily male-centric: women may hold some lower-level posts (e.g., assistant secretary, treasurer), but top leadership roles (like president or Rangbah) are typically reserved for men. (The Times of India)

According to a DW report, some Khasi men are now demanding reform of inheritance and representation laws because they feel that matrilineal traditions disadvantage them politically. Interestingly, the article also cites critiques that while matriliney is romanticised externally, in practice, women lack proportional power in governance. (Deutsche Welle)

**Cultural Custodian Role of Women:** According to a piece on Ordinaari, Khasi women are deeply involved in preserving cultural traditions, rituals, and family heritage. They pass down cultural knowledge, oversee clan rituals within the kur, and mediate family disputes. (Ordinaari)

Another study (Darlong & Suting, 2023) highlights women’s social importance: in some Khasi villages, women are “guardians of spiritual values and tradition,” and even though their political voice is limited formally, they maintain moral authority as caretakers of culture.

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### **3. Legal and Political Influences on Women's Participation in the Dorbar Shnong (KHADC, State Policies, Sixth Schedule)**

The governance of the Dorbar Shnong is deeply shaped by the legal–political framework established under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India and the subsequent regulatory powers exercised by the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC). Historically, colonial policies such as the Government of India Acts of 1870, 1919, and 1935 created a distinct administrative arrangement for hill tribes, preserving traditional institutions while preventing interference in their internal social and political structures (Bareh, 1968). This legacy continued into the post-independence period through the Sixth Schedule, which granted considerable autonomy to District Councils, including authority over customary institutions, land, and community justice.

The KHADC today regulates the powers, roles, and recognition of Syiems, Sirdars, and the Dorbar Shnong through instruments such as the United Khasi-Jaintia Hills Autonomous District (Administration of Justice) Rules, 1953. According to Lyngdoh (2019), these Rules formalised traditional village courts but did not fully integrate them into the contemporary justice system, resulting in weak enforcement capabilities—an issue also noted by the Dutta Commission, which found that these courts could not compel attendance or ensure compliance with decisions. Consequently, Dorbars maintain influence in community governance, but their authority remains semi-formal, rooted more in customary legitimacy than in fully codified legal power.

The Sixth Schedule's protective framework, though valuable for cultural preservation, has had the unintended effect of slowing gender reforms. By constitutionally safeguarding customary practices, it indirectly preserves male-dominated structures unless the KHADC proactively amends rules or issues gender-inclusive directives. As Nongbri (2003) and Karlsson (2021) argue, the Sixth Schedule creates a dual system: one that legitimizes traditional autonomy but leaves little room for external intervention, even when customary norms restrict political participation for women.

State policies, such as the Panchayati Raj reforms introduced through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment in 1992, have had limited impact in Meghalaya because the state is exempt from the Panchayati Raj system under the Sixth Schedule. Thus, the gender-reservation norms that significantly improved women's representation across India do not automatically apply to Khasi customary institutions (Mawrie, 2020). As a result, women's participation in the Dorbar Shnong remains dependent on KHADC's willingness to reform internal procedures. Although KHADC has initiated periodic discussions on village administration reform, its decisions have largely maintained status quo structures, with only gradual and uneven inclusion of women at the village level (Kharkongor, 2022).

Recent political analyses suggest that the State Government and KHADC increasingly cooperate with Dorbars for development programmes, including MPLADS, MLAs' and MDCs' schemes, creating hybrid governance where customary institutions assist in implementing formal administrative policies (Shadap, 2021). However, because Dorbars enjoy constitutional protection, outside institutions cannot enforce gender quotas or mandate women's membership unless KHADC amends its acts or village administration codes. As Warjri (2025) notes, this autonomy is a double-edged sword: it safeguards indigenous governance but also perpetuates male-majority leadership, with gender reforms emerging only where local Dorbars voluntarily adopt them.

In this legal–political environment, women's representation becomes contingent, indirect, and reliant on local interpretations of customary flexibility. While some Dorbars have begun including women in executive committees or development committees, these changes are not system-wide and often lack

formal policy frameworks. Hence, the legal–political structure — shaped by colonial administrative roots, the Sixth Schedule, KHADC authority, and the absence of nationwide Panchayati Raj mandates — plays a decisive role in limiting the speed and scope of gender-inclusive reforms within the Dorbar Shnong.

#### **4. Religious and Cultural Institutions and Their Influence on Women’s Participation in the Dorbar Shnong**

Religion and cultural institutions play a central role in structuring political authority in Khasi society, directly influencing women’s participation in Dorbar Shnong governance. The Dorbar’s authority is traditionally perceived as divinely sanctioned through the Durbar Blei, which symbolises communal righteousness, moral order, and collective decision-making (Sngi, 1995; Highland Post, 2025). Such sacred frameworks reinforce the legitimacy of male leadership, embedding political authority within ritual and religious practice.

Lyngdohs, the traditional priests, historically served as intermediaries between the divine and the community, overseeing ceremonies, administering oaths, and legitimising the decisions of the Dorbar Shnong (Lyngdoh, 2019). Authority in these religious rituals is exclusively vested in male elders, thereby institutionalising gendered hierarchies. Even though the Dorbar meetings traditionally occur in Iing Syiem (the chief’s matrilineal house), which symbolizes the matrilineal lineage, women are largely excluded from actual decision-making processes, reflecting the symbolic rather than substantive nature of their role (Lyngdoh, 2019; Highland Post, 2025).

Cultural norms and taboos further restrict women’s active participation. Certain ceremonial roles, speaking rights, and decision-making privileges are reserved for men; in some cases, male-only participation is symbolically reinforced, for instance, through ritual requirements related to age, physical appearance, or kinship status (Nongbri, 2003). Women’s contributions are often relegated to auxiliary roles such as organizing food, preparing for festivals, and facilitating communal gatherings, which reinforces their social visibility but marginalises them from political deliberation (Highland Post, 2025; Warjri, 2025).

These intersections of religion, ritual, and culture create a complex environment in which women’s political participation is constrained, not due to a lack of matrilineal lineage or social influence, but because customary, ritualistic, and moral frameworks prioritise male authority. Consequently, any reform aimed at increasing gender inclusivity in Dorbar Shnong must engage with religious and cultural dimensions, highlighting the inseparable nature of faith, tradition, and governance in Khasi society.

#### **5. Women’s Collective Action and Organisations – Lympung ki Seng Kynthei and Grassroots Mobilisation**

**Advocacy for Political Representation:** Ka Lympung ki Seng Kynthei (KLKSK) has been actively demanding that at least two women from the Seng Kynthei of each locality be included in the Executive Committee of the Dorbar Shnong. This demand aims to ensure that women can intervene meaningfully in issues affecting them, such as crimes against women. ([highlandpost.com](http://highlandpost.com); [nenews.in](http://nenews.in)) In 2023, KLKSK leaders, including its president, Theilin Phanbuh, met with KHADC officials to push for this representation, arguing that women must be part of decision-making to better handle issues like rape and other gender-specific concerns.

According to Northeast News, the KHADC has endorsed this demand and committed to including two women in the ECs of Dorbar Shnongs. ([nenews.in](http://nenews.in))

**Institutional Engagement and Reform Pressure:** The inclusion of women in Dorbar Shnong is being officially examined: a social committee of KHADC was formed after KLKSK submitted a memorandum

(in March) to review women's participation in traditional institutions. (NorthEast Now). KLKSK has raised this demand repeatedly since as early as 2011. (NorthEast Now)

National Commission for Women (NCW) member Delina Khongdup has publicly supported KLKSK's initiative, stating that change must begin with changing the mindsets of men who oppose women's entry in Dorbar Shnong. (highlandpost.com)

**Community Safety and Vigilance Activities:** Beyond political demands, women's organisations under the Seng Kynthei banner have engaged in grassroots safety work. For instance, Seng Kynthei groups in Shillong (Seng Kynthei Wahthapbroo and Seng Kynthei Umsohsun) conduct night patrols in the Motphran area to curb drug use and anti-social behavior. These patrols involve coordination with police and have had a visible impact on local security. (Northeast Live)

According to a local women's group in the West Khasi Hills (Seng Kynthei Shnong Pyndemumiong), they have collaborated with male Dorbar Shnong members to regulate public morality, prevent drunkenness, and resolve certain community disputes (including domestic violence) via their own organisation's rules. (allstudiesjournal.com)

**Symbolic and Social Mobilisation:** On International Women's Day 2025, Lympung Ki Seng Kynthei participated actively in district-level celebrations, showing strong mobilisation and a visible presence in public advocacy for gender equality.

There is political backing for women's inclusion: UDP (United Democratic Party) leader Jemino Mawthoh expressed support for KLKSK's demand for women in Dorbar Shnongs, noting that "tradition is dynamic" and must evolve. (highlandpost.com).

## **6. Economic Roles and Resource Access – Land, Livelihoods, and Political Voice**

**Land Rights and Economic Autonomy:** Khasi society is matrilineal; land is inherited through the female line, primarily via the eldest sister's children. This matrilineal system grants women substantial control over land ownership, agricultural decisions, and clan property management (Lyngdoh, 2014; Laloo, 2014). Land ownership enables women to influence family and community decisions, though it does not automatically translate to leadership in formal political institutions like the Dorbar Shnong. (Highland Post, 2024)

**Economic Control and Dorbar Shnong Authority:** Dorbar Shnong regulates local economic resources, including water supply distribution, land and boundary disputes, allocation of work in government schemes, and collection of local taxes. Most of these economic functions are controlled by male leaders (Rangbah Shnong), limiting women's access to decision-making over resources (Lyngdoh, 2014; Laloo, 2014). Some Dorbars provide economic opportunities, like hiring youth for development schemes, but women's participation in these economic decisions is marginal. (Highland Post, 2024)

**Impact of Economic Shifts:** Modern pressures, such as migration, urbanisation, and monetisation of agriculture, are changing traditional governance structures. Dorbars increasingly engage in developmental oversight, offering women indirect influence through project participation rather than formal leadership roles.

be mobilised to advocate for political representation, though formal structural barriers still exist. (Highland Post, 2024)

## **7. Leadership Models and Local Power Structures – Rangbah Shnong, Elite Capture, and Patronage Networks**

model: Rangbah Syiem (state/chief of Dorbar Hima), Lyngdohs and Basans (religious-clan authorities), Rangbah Shnong (village headman), and Rangbah Dong (locality head) (Warjri, 2025).

Key leadership positions, including executive roles like president, vice-president, secretary, treasurer, and auditor, have historically been male-exclusive, reflecting continuity of patriarchal norms despite the matrilineal inheritance system (Lyngdoh, 2014; Laloo, 2014).

**Rangbah Shnong and Power Consolidation:** The Rangbah Shnong operates as the central authority within the village, responsible for legislative, administrative, and judicial functions in the Dorbar Shnong. Patronage networks and social recognition underpin the Rangbah Shnong's influence, often leading to elite capture, where a small male-dominated elite controls resources, decision-making, and appointments (Warjri, 2025).

Disputes escalate along the chain: Dong → Shnong → Dorbar Pyllun → Police/Courts, reinforcing a male-centric governance ladder (Highland Post, 2024).

**Impact on Women's Political Participation:** Leadership pathways are effectively closed to women; formal executive roles are unavailable, and mentorship or political grooming within the Dorbar Shnong focuses on male participants (Lyngdoh, 2014).

Women's indirect influence is limited to advisory or support roles within kinship or community-based settings, while formal decision-making and public leadership remain male-dominated (Laloo, 2014).

**Role in Governance and Civic Training:** Dorbar Shnong functions as a mini-legislature and judicial body, training men in governance, public speaking, and civic responsibilities. This institutionalises male leadership and sustains the cycle of gendered exclusion from political power (Warjri, 2025; Highland Post, 2024).

### Critical Analysis

The strength of the Highland Post evidence lies in its articulation of folk democratic values — care, consensus, and community — which historically undergirded the Dorbar Shnong. These deeply embedded moral practices could provide a strong foundation for increasing women's participation, because traditional legitimacy comes from community care, not just power, opening space for women as community caretakers and leaders may be culturally resonant.

However, the colonial legacy poses a barrier. The codification and reinterpretation of customary law (Warjri, 2025) weakened traditional collective landholding and governance systems, replacing them with more individualistic property relations. This may indirectly marginalise women: in many matrilineal societies, women's power is tied to land and kin networks — if those are eroded, women's influence may decline too.

function. But its institutional legitimacy is contested. As Warjri (2025) notes, modernisation has introduced merit-based politics and new governance demands. While this can democratise the Dorbar, it also risks sidelining customary roles that historically legitimised women's informal influence. Importantly, the tiered governance model (Iing → Kur → Shnong → Raij → Hima) described aligns with historical evolutions cited in academic work (e.g., clan councils, Lyngdoh authority). But modernisation — including state legal frameworks — is challenging these layers. The reinvention of institutions like Ka Synjuk Ki Rangbah Shnong shows adaptation, but the question remains: will this reform open formal space for women, or merely replicate male dominance under a new guise? The modern challenges (migration, elite capture, self-interest) identified by Warjri are critical when assessing women's participation. These forces could either close or open opportunity: on one hand, economic and social instability might suppress inclusion; on the other, traditional institutions that

emphasise communal care might be revived to protect vulnerable members (including women) — if reformed thoughtfully.

The coexistence of matrilineal inheritance and male-dominated political authority in Khasi society is a defining paradox of gender in traditional governance. While women may be powerful within the family (especially in property and lineage), their exclusion from formal decision-making bodies like the Dorbar Shnong suggests that cultural recognition of women's social value does not seamlessly translate into political power.

The data show some customary flexibility (e.g., women representing when no male is available), but these are exceptions rather than the rule. This conditional space is significant — it reveals that tradition is not entirely rigid — but given its rarity, it also reinforces structural gender bias at key leadership levels. The role of the *kni* (maternal uncle) is especially important: even though lineage is matrilineal, political and spiritual leadership is mediated through male uncles, not through sisters or daughters. This reinforces a gendered division where male representatives speak for the maternal line, maintaining men's dominance in public affairs.

Economic and kinship authority resides with women (e.g., inheritance, care of the *kur*), but without corresponding control in the political domain. This split role is both enabling and limiting: it gives women social and economic influence, but without institutional power, this influence may not translate into formal political action.

The calls for reform (e.g., from some men questioning matrilineal norms, or from women pushing for more representation) suggest that matrilineality alone is not sufficient for gender-balanced governance. As the DW report shows, contemporary political activism around inheritance and representation underscores how cultural systems are being renegotiated in light of modern gender expectations. The cultural custodian role of women (as mediators, tradition-keepers, ritual performers) may provide fertile ground for greater political inclusion — but only if institutional reforms recognise and formalise this moral authority. Without structural changes (e.g., quotas, changed norms), the gap between symbolic respect and real power may remain wide.

Some other important developments in Dorbar Shnongs, paving the way for women's leadership, are discussed under the following heads.

**Strategic Advocacy:** KLKSK's demand for two women representatives per Dorbar EC is a realistic reform goal. Rather than pushing for radical change (like women becoming Rangbah Shnong), they are focusing on inclusion at the executive committee level, which makes their demand more palatable to traditional institutions yet meaningful for gendered accountability.

**Institutional Impact:** The fact that KHADC has agreed to examine this through a social committee (and has publicly committed to inclusion) demonstrates the sustained institutional pressure from women's organisations. This is a significant achievement, given the strength of customary resistance. However, this change is not uniform, and some opposition remains, suggesting that reform via KLKSK is incremental and negotiative.

**Grassroots Legitimacy:** The night patrols by Seng Kynthei groups in Shillong illustrate that women's collectives are not only political but also practically engaged in community welfare and safety. This builds legitimacy for their political demands because they are already taking responsibility for key social issues, not just advocating in abstract.

**Cultural Tension:** Despite KLKSK's activism, the deeply entrenched customary norms remain a barrier. The fact that social committees are being used to study women's participation rather than immediate

structural reform shows that traditional institutions are cautious and slow. Moreover, the involvement of political actors (like UDP) suggests that the reform is also politically contested, not merely culturally.

**Sustainability Concerns:** While KLKSK's efforts are commendable, sustainable political participation for women may require more than just EC representation. Without changes in how voting, nominations, and authority are organised within Dorbars, women's roles might remain symbolic rather than substantive. The organisation's approach of working with existing institutions (Dorbar + KHADC) rather than challenging them outright is pragmatic, but could risk co-option rather than transformation.

**Generational Change:** KLKSK has been advocating since 2011, indicating long-term commitment. Their involvement in social issues (like drug patrol) also helps them connect with younger women and community stakeholders. This means their demand is not just for seats, but for structural legitimacy, which could shape future gender norms in traditional governance.

**Economic vs. Political Agency Gap:** Khasi women enjoy significant economic autonomy through land ownership, yet this does not automatically translate to political authority in Dorbar Shnong. The persistence of male-dominated decision-making in resource allocation demonstrates a structural separation between economic and political power.

**Indirect Influence:** Women's control over land and other resources allows subtle leverage, e.g., influencing family votes or advocating in community meetings. This informal influence can shape outcomes but remains secondary to formal male authority.

**Modern Opportunities and Challenges:** Economic modernisation, migration, and youth employment programs offer both opportunities and risks. Women may gain indirect influence through development schemes, but may also face marginalisation if Dorbars increasingly professionalise and centralise resource control in male hands.

**Policy Implications:** Integrating women into Dorbar Shnong leadership could harness their economic expertise to improve resource governance, local development, and inclusive decision-making. Current structural barriers maintain traditional hierarchies, limiting the potential of economic agency to evolve into political empowerment.

**Structural Exclusion:** The Rangbah Shnong model demonstrates how traditional governance reproduces gender hierarchies, with formal leadership almost exclusively male. Even in a matrilineal society, political authority remains concentrated in male networks.

**Elite Capture and Patronage:** Patronage networks allow local elites to control resource allocation and dispute resolution, often reinforcing nepotism and limiting access for alternative voices, particularly women and younger community members.

**Socialisation of Leadership:** The Dorbar Shnong serves as a training ground for men in governance, law, and civic engagement. This socialisation effect perpetuates male dominance, making it difficult for women to break into leadership positions.

**Policy Implications:** For meaningful gender inclusion, reforms need to open leadership positions formally to women, provide mentorship and political training, and address elite capture mechanisms to ensure broader community representation.

## Conclusion

The analysis of women's political participation in the village councils of East Khasi Hills reveals a complex intersection of historical, cultural, legal, and institutional factors that continue to shape gendered power relations. Although Khasi society is matrilineal in lineage and inheritance, political authority has

remained largely male-dominated from pre-colonial clan-based Dorbar institutions to present-day village governance under the KHADC. Customary norms, reinforced by religious beliefs and symbolic practices, limit women's direct participation in decision-making despite a few emerging relaxations in selected villages. Legal and constitutional reforms, including the provisions of the Sixth Schedule and influences of the 73rd Amendment, have introduced new opportunities, yet these have not substantially altered entrenched customary structures. Leadership pathways within Dorbar Shnong remain controlled by male elites, supported by patronage networks and cultural expectations. Overall, the findings indicate that while matrilineality provides women social recognition, it does not necessarily translate into political empowerment. Sustainable change will require a combination of institutional reforms, sensitisation efforts, and community-driven dialogues that respect tradition while promoting gender-inclusive governance.

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