



WOMEN in GRASSROOTS GOVERNANCE: A Survey

THAT women and men are equal citizens of the country is enshrined in the Constitution of India. This by itself justifies equal representation for women in all social, political and economic processes and structures. International mechanisms like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) emphasise the participation of women in decision-making bodies without any discrimination. But translating this into practice remains a huge challenge in India.

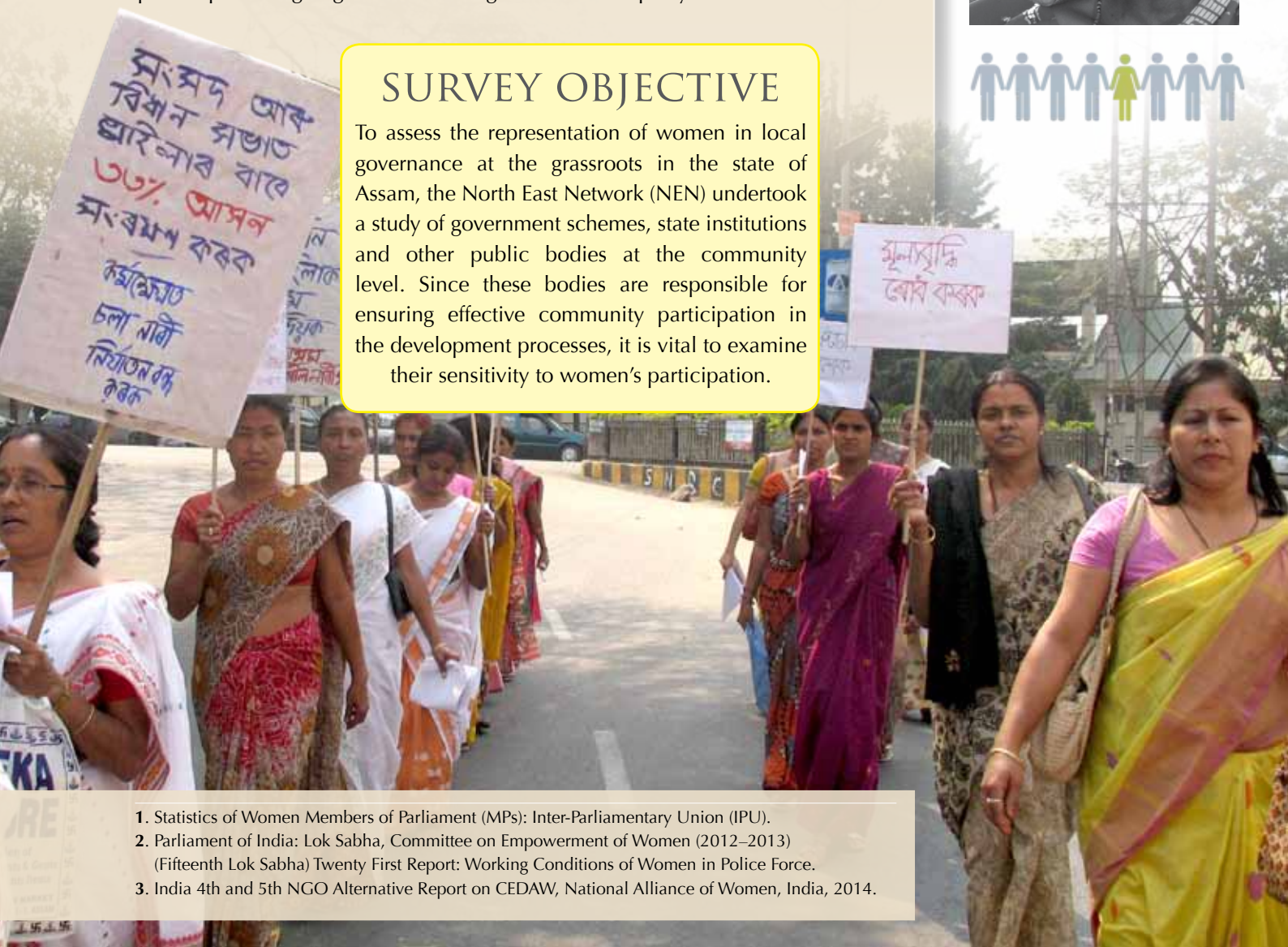
There are very low levels of representation of women in electoral and public bodies – primarily because of the structural barriers inherent in patriarchy, a culture that is omnipresent in the country. The Women’s Reservation Bill (aiming to reserve 33% of the seats in the Lok Sabha and in state assemblies for women) has itself been pending in Parliament for more than a decade. Women have only 11% representation in India’s Lower House and 10.6% in the Upper House.¹ The all-India average representation of women in the police forces is only 5.33% as on 1 January 2012,² while out of the 630 High Court Judges (Permanent and Additional) in the country as on April 2014, only 59 (9.4%) are women.³ The picture pertaining to grassroots’ level governance is equally bleak.

Women have a mere 11% representation in India’s Lok Sabha and 10.6% in the Rajya Sabha.



SURVEY OBJECTIVE

To assess the representation of women in local governance at the grassroots in the state of Assam, the North East Network (NEN) undertook a study of government schemes, state institutions and other public bodies at the community level. Since these bodies are responsible for ensuring effective community participation in the development processes, it is vital to examine their sensitivity to women’s participation.



1. Statistics of Women Members of Parliament (MPs): Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU).
2. Parliament of India: Lok Sabha, Committee on Empowerment of Women (2012–2013) (Fifteenth Lok Sabha) Twenty First Report: Working Conditions of Women in Police Force.
3. India 4th and 5th NGO Alternative Report on CEDAW, National Alliance of Women, India, 2014.

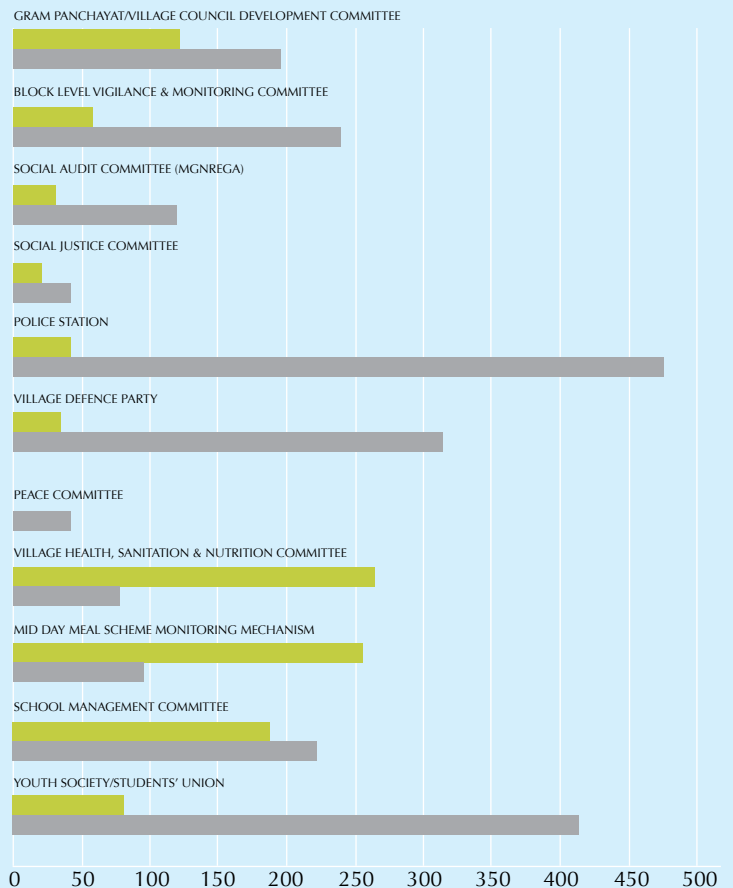


SURVEY COVERAGE

This extensive survey was conducted over November–December 2014 in 13 districts of Assam: Darrang, Udalguri, Nagaon, Sonitpur, Golaghat, Karbi Anglong, Lakhimpur, Sivasagar, Dhemaji, Tinsukia, Kamrup (rural), Kokrajhar and Chirang. Carried out at the Gram Panchayat (GP)/Village Council Development Committee (VCDC) level, the survey was handled by community women trained by NEN. Information was procured from the official representatives of the government/public institutions selected for the study, such as GPs/VCDCs, Social Audit Committees (MGNREGA), police stations, Village Defence Parties, peace committees, the Mid Day Meal Scheme monitoring mechanism, etc. The major challenges during the survey were inadequate participation by the respondents and lack of access to accurate and credible information.

SURVEY FINDINGS

Of the 11 government schemes/institutions/bodies selected for the survey, women have higher representation than men only in 2 committees. An average representation was noticed in 3 committees, while 6 of them had extremely poor representation of women.



REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN & MEN IN GRASSROOTS SCHEMES/BODIES

As many as 6 public committees/bodies showed very poor representation of women, out of the 11 selected for the survey.

GRAM PANCHAYAT/VILLAGE COUNCIL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Panchayats are one of the oldest forms of local self-governance in India, with a decentralised process of functioning. Along with GPs, Assam also has VCDCs as per the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India. GPs and VCDCs are the chief agencies for connecting larger political processes and developments in the country with the grassroots. There are 33% reserved seats for women in Panchayats in India; a few states have raised the reservation to 50%, Assam being one of them. GP members are elected; they consist of a president, secretary/vice president and elected ward members from all the villages under the Panchayat. VCDCs consist of selected members, including a chairperson.

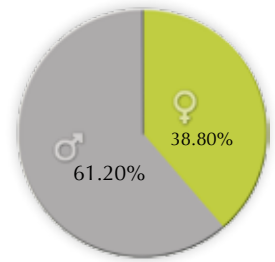


BLOCK LEVEL VIGILANCE & MONITORING COMMITTEE

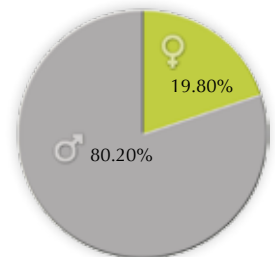
As the name suggests, this committee is responsible for supervising various programmes implemented at the Block level under the Rural Development Programme. It has the power to look into complaints such as the misuse of funds and recommend necessary action to the concerned state government authority. The committee is composed of local elected representatives, i.e. the MLA and MP, 2 local social workers (1 woman), 1 representative from the Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities each, and the local Block Development Officer.

SOCIAL AUDIT COMMITTEE (MGNREGA)

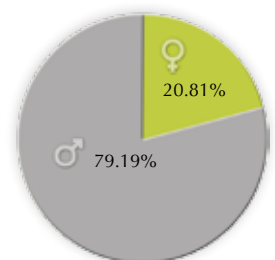
Social audits are conducted to assess projects under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). This also ensures accountability and participation of grassroots people in the governance process. The audits are supervised by GPs/VCDCs. Audits are conducted by a 3–6 member team consisting of youth representatives (including a woman), job card holders and retired teachers.



While the overall figure for women's representation in the 26 GPs and VCDCs surveyed is 38.80%, the figure is 49.35% for GPs and only 10.46% for VCDCs



Women account for 19.80% of the composition of Block Level Vigilance & Monitoring Committees

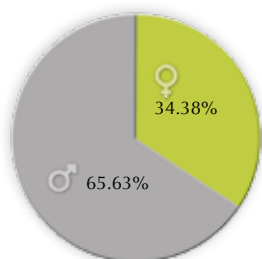


Only 20.81% of the committees assessing MGNREGA projects are women

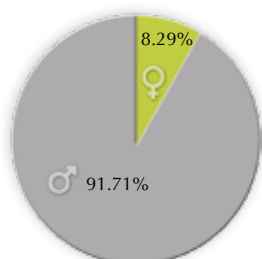


SOCIAL JUSTICE COMMITTEE

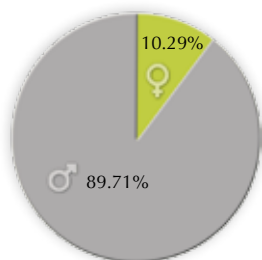
Formed under the jurisdiction of GPs, these committees are entrusted with ensuring effective implementation of various constitutional provisions while allocating rural development schemes, with special consideration for ST/SCs, women and other backward classes. Our study revealed that only 4 out of the 13 districts surveyed have formed this committee. Members are usually chosen from among the GP/VCDC members.



Social Justice Committees have 34.38% representation of women



Only 8.29% of the police force in the surveyed districts are women



VDPs have a low representation of women – only 10.29%



POLICE STATION

The police station/outpost is the first contact point for women in the community. So, it is essential that women police are readily available to deal with violence against women. In addition, the presence of women police encourages women complainants to report their cases without hesitation. According to the Bureau of Police Research and Development's 2013 data, the number of women police in Assam is 635, i.e. only 1.15 % of the total police force. In addition to the low presence of women (8.29%) in the police force, the positions they hold are in the lower echelons, such as Home Guard and Constable categories. An exception was a police station in Chirang district which had a woman Sub Inspector (SI).

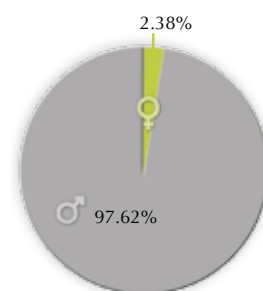
VILLAGE DEFENCE PARTY (VDP)

Under the Village Defence Act, 1960, VDPs were formed on the initiative of the Assam Police to forge better police–public relations. The work of a VDP primarily involves cooperating with the police in the investigation of local law and order incidents and promoting awareness in the village on issues of health, education, etc. The local police station and the concerned public can decide the composition of the VDP. It usually consists of members from all villages under the jurisdiction of the police station along with a representative from the police station.

VDPs have been an effective mechanism at the village level. However, the inclusion of women in the VDPs is almost a non-issue. In 2011, the Chief Minister of Assam announced that the government would establish a women's wing of the VDP to prevent crimes against women. However, our survey revealed that only Kamrup (rural) had a separate all-women VDP. There are no woman representatives in VDPs in Lakhimpur, Sonitpur, Nagaon, Chirang, Golaghat, Darrang, Udalguri and Kokrajhar districts.

PEACE COMMITTEE

In recent years, following the eruption of ethnic conflicts leading to violence and large-scale displacement, district administrations have taken the initiative to form peace committees. Peace committees are effective mechanisms for preempting violence and promoting peace, but such committees are formed only for a temporary period. NEN's survey revealed the insubstantial nature of these peace committees, which often have no mandate on their composition, functional guidelines and achievable outcomes. Only Chirang district has a functioning peace committee with a total of 42 members, of whom only 1 is a woman.



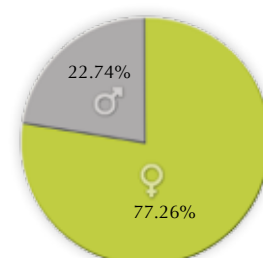
Women constitute a mere **2.38%** in peace committees



VILLAGE HEALTH, SANITATION & NUTRITION COMMITTEE (VHSNC)

One of the rudiments of the National Rural Health Mission is the VHSNC, formed at the revenue village level and functioning as a subcommittee of the GP. The committee is mandated to take stock and monitor health situations and its intersectional parameters, such as nutrition and sanitation, in the village. It comprises a minimum of 15 members, including: elected member of the Panchayat as the head of the committee, Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA), Anganwadi Women Worker (AWW), Auxiliary Nurse & Midwife (ANM), and representation from all community sub-groups and marginalised sections. There is 50% reservation of women in this committee.

Our survey findings have revealed a higher representation of women than men in VHSNCs. While this committee presents a positive picture of women's representation, this is not surprising given its structure – it primarily comprises ASHAs, AWWs and ANMs who are women.

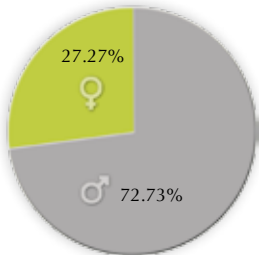


VHSNCs have a high representation of women – **77.26%**

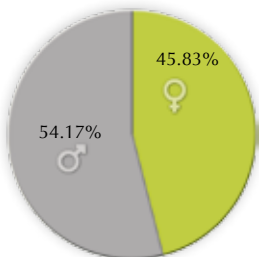


MID DAY MEAL SCHEME (MDMS) MONITORING MECHANISM

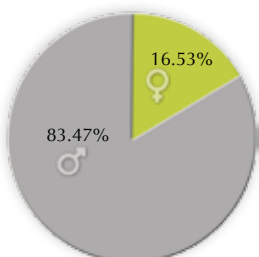
Initiated by the Directorate of Elementary Education of Assam in 2005, the Mid Day Meal Scheme aims to improve the nutritional status of school-going children. Several mechanisms have been devised at different levels (from national to school) to monitor its implementation; these include school management committees, school authorities and mothers' groups to supervise the programme at the school level. Data was collected primarily from the mothers' groups as well as from school management committees. NEN's finding of 72.73% women being involved in monitoring the MDMS is not surprising given that mothers' groups comprise 100% women. Another contributing factor to the higher representation of women in monitoring MDMS is the conventional social norm of linking children and nutrition with women.



The MDMS monitoring mechanism boasts **72.73%** women's representation



SMCs have less than **50%** representation of women



Only **16.53%** of the executive bodies of youth/student bodies are women



SCHOOL MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE (SMC)

Under Section 21 of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, SMCs have been formed to monitor the working of schools and their development plans. Such committees consist of parents/guardians of children, local individuals, health/anganwadi workers, Panchayat officials and the school authorities; 50% of its members are supposed to be women. The reason behind low representation of women (45.83%) despite the reserved quota is that although SMCs have been formed in all schools, the guideline on women's reservation has not been fully implemented.

YOUTH SOCIETY/STUDENTS' UNION

Student/youth bodies were selected for our survey because this is one mechanism for social justice and development at the community level that represents young voices. Although membership drives are organised to include both women and men in these organisations, gender disparity in their executive bodies is stark and the issue is largely ignored. So, while women and men contribute equally to activities ranging from mobilising to organising, women are barred from decision-making roles in these bodies. Of the districts surveyed, 6 did not have any women in the executive committee of the youth bodies.

CONCLUSION

Low or under-representation of women in formal and informal public bodies, as revealed in this document, once again highlights the imbalance between the de jure and de facto reality of the situation of women in Assam. While this can be attributed to the pervasive inequality and discrimination that women have faced historically, women and women's groups are increasingly voicing their dissent against this state of perpetual subordination and marginalisation.

This has resulted in the government adopting affirmative measures to address such gender imbalances. Having said this, we reiterate the need for more strategic and gender-sensitive policy measures, and offer the following recommendations:

- Appropriate reservation for women in the local governance structure and community processes in Assam. This includes all mechanisms available at the community level, from planning and implementation to monitoring of various schemes, legislations and programmes of the government.
 - Increasing reservation for women to 50% in the local governance bodies of the Sixth Schedule areas, following the Assam Government's measure of having 50% reservation for women in all tiers of the Panchayati Raj system.
 - Reservation of 33% seats for women in the Parliament and the state legislatures by adopting the Constitution (108th Amendment) Bill; this has been reiterated by the UN CEDAW committee in a Concluding Observation (No. 24) in the combined fourth and fifth periodic reports for India.
 - Enhancing capacities of women at the grassroots to participate in larger public and political processes.



We support the UN CEDAW Committee's Concluding Observation (No. 25b, 2014) for India and urge the government to:

... create an enabling environment for women to participate in all democratic processes, including elections, and in particular strengthen the participation of women in gram sabhas, mahila sabhas and other formal and informal governance forums at the local level.





NORTH EAST NETWORK

North East Network (NEN) is a women's rights organisation established in 1995 during the mobilisation process for the Beijing Conference on women. Since its inception, the organisation has been raising issues related to women's human rights, particularly within the developmental and political context of India's north east region. NEN focuses on the empowerment of women around issues of health and livelihood, and violence against women that occurs in conflict situations and in the domestic sphere.

NEN believes the enjoyment of women's human rights is possible only with sensitive state efforts towards ending gender-based discrimination and disparities. The principles of equality, non-discrimination and state obligation

enshrined in the CEDAW Convention have shaped the organisation's many programmes and strategies. NEN responds to specific needs of women through fact-finding processes and advocacy with the government. In addition, it organises trainings and workshops, and publishes materials to disseminate information on women's issues amongst the stakeholders. NEN has offices in Assam, Meghalaya and Nagaland.

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