

**WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP POSITIONS**  
**A Scoping Paper**

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## **Abstract**

This paper is based on interviews with women in leadership positions in some villages and cities in the four hill states of Himachal, Uttaranchal, Manipur and Meghalaya and on a review of available literature on leadership.

We try to identify the characteristics of women's leadership as they emerge from the interviews, and the importance of groups and collectives in the development of leadership and articulation of issues. The primary hypothesis that emerges from this preliminary exploration is that the emergence of women's leadership seems to be closely linked to the existence of informal women's groups and collectives. A second hypothesis is that the existence of women with leadership qualities is insufficient to engender the agenda, it is necessary that the structure should allow space and should be responsive and flexible. There does appear to be a difference in the style of women's and men's leadership and in the issues they bring to the table. The issues themselves vary from place to place.

It needs to be emphasised that this is a preliminary study, with the main purpose of identifying promising areas for further research.

## Outline

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### Section I: Background, Context and Method

#### Background and Context

The Government of India is fully committed to the objective of enhancing the participation of women in key institutions and decision making structures at various levels. An increased presence of women in decision making structures is, in due course, expected to influence both the kind of issues that find a place on the policy agenda, as well as the allocation of resources. With the passing of the 73 rd and 74 th Constitutional amendments, and the reservation of one third of the seats in local government for women, an enabling framework has been put in place and over a million women have been elected to local level institutions (PRIs). However, the extent to which this has resulted in effective political participation, improvement in the overall status of women, and programmatic responses in the form of sectoral interventions, needs to be further researched.

Implicit in the notion of effective political participation by women is the idea of leadership. This forms the background against which this paper has been written. The broad objective of the paper is to identify the themes and issues on which greater research is needed, in order to understand better the nature of women's leadership.

#### Methodology

This paper is based mainly on field interviews, and also draws upon a selective review of literature on leadership. Around thirty women leaders from four hill states were met and spoken with in the course of this study. The interviews are based on a one time interaction and there were no follow up visits. However, even with these limitations the interviews provided a glimpse of the qualities of leadership that have emerged in many different places and the difference it has made to the lives of many women.

In approaching the women, we were introduced by persons known to us who themselves are working among the women in these places. Profiles of the women met are included in full in Annex I. Each of these women is in a leadership position of some kind, either a member of a women's group, or of the Panchayat (in many cases both). They each play a role in the 'public' sphere as well as in the private sphere within the home. However their life experiences are different, the nature of the issues that exercise them are different, their perception of their own present and future roles is very different. These profiles are

based on quick interviews and may not reveal many things for which a longer stay and better understanding of the area would be essential.

While fully recognizing these limitations, the interviews bring out certain issues which appear to us to be worthy of further and more detailed study.

The areas we visited included rural villages in Uttaranchal, an urbanized segment of Himachal, urban Shillong in Meghalaya, and Churachandpur in Manipur. Each of these places is very different from the other. Given the differences in geography, history, politics and economy, it would not be appropriate to draw any comparisons between them. What we have tried to do therefore is simply to list the various issues that seemed to emerge from the interviews and discussions, which seem to us to be potentially rewarding areas in any future study.

## **Section II: A Research Agenda**

In this section, the various issues that could be identified on the basis of the interviews as areas in which further study would be rewarding are briefly reviewed.

### **1. Concept of Leadership**

Leadership as has been generally understood can be defined as a special kind of ‘soft power’<sup>1</sup> where essential in the concept of power is the role of ‘purpose’. That is, leaders exercise power for some purpose, and the purpose itself can vary widely according to context. Clarity of the purpose becomes important because it is a shared domain between leaders and others, and linked to questions of motivation. Several studies have appeared evaluating various leadership theories.

The role of the collective or ‘collective leadership’ is a concept that needs to be more clearly articulated to capture a unique feature of leadership by women. (from another context, 1000 women for peace)<sup>2</sup>

*When Vimla the Adhyaksha of the Mahila Mangal Dal , Maichun village, Uttaranchal, was asked about the leadership qualities that she has, she says that it is the collective leadership that is the focus of the mangal dals and she did not consider herself a leader. Most of the women associated with the women collective shared a similar point of view.*

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<sup>1</sup> Leadership has been identified with the concept of power by *James McGregor Burns* in his work *Leadership* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979). He writes like power leadership is relational, purposeful and collective. However in reach and domain of leadership is more limited than that of power, as leaders do not obliterate followers’ motives though they may arouse certain motives and ignore others. Power holders may treat people as things, leaders may not. pp.18.

<sup>2</sup> In 2005, 100 years after the first woman recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, Bertha von Suttner, 1000 women have been proposed to be (jointly) the recipients of the prize. The valuable and exemplary nature of their work has been confirmed by their nomination for this esteemed prize. The reason for rewarding thousand women was the hope that awarding the Nobel Peace Prize to a number of women will enhance the recognition to women’s work throughout the world. This incident is a pointer to collective leadership and a remarkable testimony to the value that women place on networks. Available at, <http://www.reddesalud.org/english/sitio/info.asp?Ob=1&Id=164>.

Collective leadership can also be identified with the feminist principles of leadership, which seek to enable all women to develop their leadership potential.<sup>3</sup>

## **2. Characteristics of women leaders**

Some characteristics of women leaders that can be noted include

- a. Individual character, and ability to respond positively to hardship
- b. Empathy with others
- c. Willingness to speak out
- d. Honesty
- e. Ability to get support from family and spouse
- f. Strong belief in the power of the group or collective
- g. Staying power

And so on.

What needs to be noted is that it is character and confidence rather than knowledge or literacy that marks out these women. Literacy was one variable that did not emerge as one of the qualifying criteria for potential women leaders. Literacy and /or information are like tools which are wielded and used as necessary – not essential attributes of the role. The issue of class and caste did not come out so prominently as a mobilizing device. Many of the villages visited were single caste villages, and it seemed that issues relating to leadership were not linked in any simple manner to caste or class. Sensitivity to concerns of women seemed the single overriding characteristic of women leaders.

*Nanki Devi, who is illiterate, and the Pradhan of the Mahila Mandal, asserts that if women have the courage they can do anything. Remembering her days she says when she was alone; she used to bow down to mother earth every morning and pray for her protection. There were times when she was alone, but now she is well off.; her sons are settled and her daughters married. Every one in the village knows her and they also respect her for her struggles.*

*Similarly Khurmuri Devi, Adhayaksha, Mahila Mangal Dal, Uttaranchal has had no formal education and says education does not really help the women in speaking out on issues. She emphasizes that she is not literate but still is far better than those women who being educated cannot speak out in public.*

## **3. Outcomes of women's leadership**

Successful women leaders show a transformational style of leadership, which in many cases has been nurtured through informal associations and collectives.

The early writings on leadership have largely been conducted on business environment, with success being measured through competition, profit making and ethos of competition. This environment is very different from that of the women leaders interviewed, many of whom are in a rural environment where most of the activities are

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<sup>3</sup> *Feminist Principles: The Feminist Principles for Leadership.* Available At:<http://dawn.thot.net/feminism11.html>

interdependent on each other, and also different from the environment in which politics is played out.

During the field visits it was observed that most of the women leaders who were interviewed did not hold formal positions of power. In some places it was seen that women associated with the informal structures were more capable in voicing women concerns than that of *pradhans* or the *ward members*. This is an interesting distinction because it was seen that women *do* speak when the issues concern them. They *do* make efforts to attend meetings and create time out of their busy schedule, when the concerns can be identified with their day-to-day realities. Also participation of the women in the informal institutions provides a process for women to understand and engage with issues according to their long and short-term interests. The presidents of these informal associations therefore act, as Burns very rightly puts it, as *transformational* leaders.<sup>4</sup> This is in contrast to *transactional* leadership, where commitment is more confined to the roles allotted to individuals. Spaces for women therefore in form of *associations*, *mahila mandal* and *mahila mangal dals*, as it came out through the field observations were identified as necessary for enabling the women to perform in an effective manner, in contrast to processes which put an emphasis on implanting women into formal structures.

*For instance in Uttaranchal, Durga Bisht, who is currently a member of the Block Development Committee is an effective leader who has mobilized her village women to fight against alcoholism and as a BDC member she was also successful in ransacking many liquor shops (local brews) in the village. Through her own initiative she helped opening up of a school in the village, which was being used as an animal shed. The building was renovated and now primary school children go to the building.*

*In Himachal Pradesh, Raj Rani from Ramshahar, Solan district is a Block Samiti Member. She has built many water tanks in the village, constructed roads and takes personal interest in solving cases relating to women. She says she tries to solve cases outside the court and tries to talk both the man and the woman concerned at times separately and then collectively. She has also helped many poor women with schemes like IRDP, Indra Awas Yojana.*

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<sup>4</sup> One of the most influential works on leadership in the past century was written by James MacGregor Burns (1978). Burns puts forth the quintessential essentialist perspective within the power and influence tradition, reviewing hundreds of years of conceptualizations of leadership in order to ascertain key aspects. His goal is to develop a "general" theory of leadership that transcends time, context, and culture, which is itself the task of an essentialist. Burns puts forth the proposition that leadership is an ideal relationship that is characterized by two basic types: transactional and transforming. The transactional leader is much more common and is involved with exchanging one thing for another. Bureaucrats, political parties, and legislators tend to operate within the transactional form of leadership. The transformational leader seeks to cultivate followers' higher needs and engages the full person of the follower. The transformational leadership process is more mutual and elevates the follower and leader. Burns also examines moral leadership that is related to the fundamental needs, aspirations, and values of the followers and also an inherent part of transformational leadership. The aim of leadership is social change measured by intent and by the satisfaction of human needs and expectations. Burns refers to this aim as the "essence" of leadership. Transformational and transactional leadership are idealized types that are characterized by essential, timeless, unchanging features that can be identified across culture, situation, and context. Also, Burns believes it is possible for the leader to identify the "true" and essential needs of followers - certain universal psychological, economic, spiritual, aesthetic, and safety needs.

*In Meghalaya women's groups engaged actively in social leadership like combating alcoholism, and creating awareness about the influence of alcohol and the need to protest against the sale of alcohol. Kong Patricia Mukhim in Shillong, said that women are now realizing the need to federate and a need to be associated with an organization is being felt for issues like rape and domestic violence.*

#### **4. Style of leadership: concern for others**

Many of the women leaders saw their role as essentially serving the needs of others.

This trait, of a 'servant leader'<sup>5</sup>, is especially seen in women who have experienced considerable hardships in their lives, and where this itself has become a motivation to help other women.

*For instance, the president of mahila mandal in Garkhal, Solan, Himachal Pradesh, Nanki Devi has seen a tough life. When her eldest son was in Class 10 her husband died in a sudden accident. Then she had just seven rupees in her hand. Though the factory owner had promised a job to her son, after her husband's death, the job was not given to him as he failed in his board examination. Nanki had four other children to look after and none of her relatives supported her. In order to earn a living she used to take coal from the factory at wee hours sell it in the market. The money saved from selling coal was invested in buying and then raising animals. When asked how did she get the vision, or what was the support system that directed her, she replied that when you have courage you can do anything and when a person does not have anything, she has to think of various things on her own to open up a path for herself. Nanki said she thought day and night on how to support herself and her family and though she took loans she always worried as to whether she had the resources to pay them back. Nanki took loans from SUTRA, the NGO working in that area, as well as under various government schemes. She said she had to generate money to pay back her loans and for this she worked extra hard to fulfill her responsibilities. The mahila mandal was formed under her leadership. She said an officer from the forest department had approached her and said that if a mahila mandal could be formed in the village, they could plant some trees and for their labour get money. As there was no mahila mandal existing in the village then, Nanki talked to two or three women who used to go to other villages for the meetings, after convincing them a mahila mandal was formed.*

*Tingneikim is the Secretary, Kuki Women Union in Manipur. The KWU was formed in 1993 due to the ethnic clashes between the nagas and kukis. The women did not know*

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<sup>5</sup> Greenleaf's concept of the servant leader falls within the trait/behavioral approach to studying leadership (some refer to it as a reciprocal approach). Greenleaf identifies the essential features of the servant leader, providing a guide for behavior. He describes exemplary individuals he has observed who exhibit the behaviors of servant leaders noting that the qualities transcend context, organization, or historical time period. Thus the leader is a servant, a person who first wants to serve others and puts their needs and desires before his or her own. A set of traits and behaviors mark the servant leader: goal oriented, listens and understands others, pays attention to language and meaning, imagination, reflection, acceptance and empathy, focusing on the unknowable, prophetic or practicing foresight, awareness and perception, persuasion, and conceptualizing. Greenleaf reviews the actions and traits of leaders throughout history to identify this group of essential traits and behaviors.



*what to do, there was no agency where they could go to, so they just offered prayers in the church. KWU was formed in Senapati district, and then came to Churachandpur in 1993. Then it was in every district, today it exists only in Churachandpur, and meets once a month. Tingneikim is a founding member of KWU- Churachandpur district. She said as a student in 1990-93 she was not interested but due to dire circumstances, she became active.*

The leadership of women emphasizes reciprocity, mutuality, and responsibility toward others; is collective and participatory; focuses on relationships and empowerment; and highlights outcomes as a central goal of leadership. In contrast to men's style, they de-emphasize hierarchical relationships, individualism, and one-way power relationships.

*In Himachal Pradesh Kamlesh Chauhan, Secretary, Garhkhal said that even men have started approaching the mahila mandals to solve the problems which they have. The reason for this is the commitment with which the women do their work.*

*Hanjabam Radhe Sarma, in Thoubal, Manipur, was very impressed with the Meira Paibies. She had heard of the MP before the bandh. She knew that they were involved with Nisa Bandh. It was the strongest group that she had encountered. She went around Thoubal for 6 months collecting/organising women and formed the Meira Paibi there. As she felt the need of women to come together from the nearby villages she used to spend one day in every village. She organised to have representatives at one place and bore the expenses of their travel. She explained the necessity of such a group to women. Also though she invited only women she later explained all this to men in the villages. She feels that men should be included. (Radhe was known in the villages as she used to travel with costumes for the Raslila). When she started the MP the liquor problem was in her village also. Her own son was drinking. One day she saw her son drinking. She took him to the club and had him thrashed (elder son) setting an example. She warned the liquor sellers to stop selling.*

*Pushpa Rawat, Pradhan, Saneri village, is a spontaneous decision-maker who says the concern for development and the village women are her foremost priority. She welcomes obstacles as they show her new ways to approach issues; however she wants more people to come ahead and shoulder the responsibility and says she is tired of fighting battles and holding the responsibility of two positions simultaneously.*

## **5. The issues of concern**

The issues with which women leaders were seen to be concerned were set by the women themselves, not imposed by any external agent

The women leaders spoken to were all deeply involved in the life of the community, and the issues raised are correspondingly different from place to place. Thus 'security' was paramount in Manipur. This means also that effective leadership appears to build upwards from the felt needs of women, rather than implementing a programme devised externally. This, too, needs to be further studied and its implications developed.

*In Manipur it is out of concern for security that women leaders play the role in peace negotiations. For instance, from 1996 Nayani was very active in Meira Paibi, the women collective in Manipur, as a member. In 1996 in a conflict between Zomi (Peitis) and*

*Kukis, Nayani played the role of the negotiator. Since Meities were not involved in conflict, people asked her to take lead. Since 1998 she has been the secretary of ILPL. Nayani was born and brought up in Churachandpur, and knows people in both Zomi and Kuki communities especially Zomis as she lives in that community. Before peace negotiations, she was involved in Nisa Bandha & other social activities. However of late she has stopped negotiating between Zomis and Kukis and has started negotiating between different armed groups and people; intra armed groups; between security forces and people; and security forces and armed groups. Nayani has become the chief negotiator for the whole district among Meties.*

*Similarly Hmar Women's Association (HWA) was set up in 1988. A procession was taken out, and the Mizoram and the Armed Police beat the people in the procession. Some were very seriously injured and killed. The injured were brought for treatment in Manipur where there were other Hmar people. The Mizo govt. announced that HPC was an underground outfit. The then Chief Minister-Llthan Howla(Mizoram) utilised some Hmar people as home-guards who were sent to Churachandpur to arrest people. The men asked the women to help in release of the arrested. The women rang the 'alarm' bell and went to the police station with lighted torches and slogans – at midnight. There were a thousand women present, and the police did not know how to deal with them. The women also shouted at the police for being used by the Mizo government. Initially the police threatened with arms but did not do anything. One-by-one they released the arrested people.*

In looking at the issues that concern women, we find that they vary considerably from place to place, bringing out the importance of context in any study of women's leadership. This aspect of leadership has been recognised in cultural, cognitive, contextual theories of leadership.<sup>6</sup> Cognitive theories of leadership identify how leaders have different perspectives or lenses.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Social constructivism is the belief that reality is developed through people's interpretation of the world and a denial of essences. Reality is a social and cultural construction, not an idealized form beyond our immediate perception. By examining multiple interpretations, a shared sense of reality can be detected; yet, our understanding of reality is always partial and imperfect. Constructivism is a philosophy founded on the premise that, by reflecting on our experiences, we construct our own understanding of the world we live in. Each of us generates our own "rules" and "mental models," which we use to make sense of our experiences. The cognitive perspective is more aligned with the constructivism perspective, while the cultural perspective is closer to the social constructivist perspective. More recently, postmodern theorizing of leadership has also been conducted. Postmodern scholars challenge universal truths and essences because there is no objective vantage point (or reality) and our perceptions are the only thing we can come to know. They also question whether universal essences or truths even exist beyond our perceptions. Instead, knowledge is seen as contingent to local conditions and contexts. Thus social constructivists, constructivists, and post-modernists take a non-essentialist view that leadership is shaped by local conditions, individual backgrounds/experience, and circumstances. Local conditions and circumstances vary and "essential" situation types are not possible to identify. There are no essential traits or behaviors that can or should be identified; the process is contingent upon many factors and conditions.

<sup>7</sup> For example, Bolman's and Deal's research, *Reframing Organization*, 1991, demonstrated that leaders tend to examine situations through one or more lens or cognitive orientations (e.g., political, symbolic, structural, or human resource). Building on contingency theory, they also demonstrated that different situations might require different cognitive approaches to leadership; a political orientation might serve a leader in one situation while a bureaucratic orientation is important within another. They break from contingency theorists' essentialist efforts of matching situation and leader type. Instead, they describe how

## 6. 'Leadership' and 'empowerment'

Being in a formal position of 'power' is not always equivalent to being a leader

The 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment has brought many women into Panchayati Raj institutions. Some of these have been termed as proxies of their respective husbands – 'pati pradhans'.

*Shobha (Gram Pradhan) does not understand much and the seal remains with her husband. She says her husband is the appropriate candidate because he is an M.Sc and there is no one in the village as educated as him. She said he understands and can tackle every thing.*

'Leadership' implies 'empowerment'. Empowerment has been generally understood as a process through which existing power relations can be challenged; as a way of gaining and controlling informational resources.<sup>8</sup> At times, empowerment is confused with being in a formal position of power. Some authors have also seen empowerment of women in the form of expansion of spaces.<sup>9</sup> Collective Space can be seen to play an important role in enabling the functioning of informal structures or women groups like the Mahila Mangal Dals, Mahila Mandals and the Meira Paibis. And the ability of women leaders to create their own individual space emerges as an important aspect of effective functioning.

In all the states collectives have been an important mechanism for negotiation, both to bargain or at times threaten over issues.<sup>10</sup> Collectives are seen as an effective tool for mobilizing women and also as an effective pressure group to push a women's agenda. However it was seen that the issues themselves vary from place to place, there are no

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leaders often try to lead organizations by finding the one right answer and the one best way and they are stunned by the turmoil and resistance that they thereby generate. Bolman and Deal argue that leaders must be passionately committed to their principles, but flexible in understanding and responding to the events, situation, and contexts around them that are constantly shifting and changing.

<sup>8</sup> According to *Kumud Sharma*, Empowerment is a process aimed at changing the nature and direction of systemic forces which marginalize women and other disadvantaged section in a given context. Similarly *S.K. Chandra* defines empowerment as the manifestation of redistribution of power that challenges patriarchal ideology and male dominance. It is a transformation of the structures or institutions that reinforces and perpetuates gender discrimination. It is a process that enables women to gain access to and control of material as well as informational sources. (Evelin Hust, *Women's Political Representation and Empowerment in India: A Million Indras Now*, New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 2004) Pp-45-46.

<sup>9</sup> According to *Srilatha Batliwala*, Empowerment can be understood as an expansion in spaces - physical spaces, economic, socio-cultural and political spaces. For details see, *Joy Deshmukh- Ranadive*, 'Are Democracy, Human Rights Valid within Domestic Units? Some Theoretical Explorations. *Indian Journal Of Gender Studies*, 12:1(2005), pp-103-105.

<sup>10</sup> *Devaki Jain*, 'Women's Leadership and Ethics of Development, *Gender and Development Monograph Series, UNDP, 1996, pp12-18*, says, collective struggles around which women mobilize are issues concerning livelihood, income, family security and so on. In taking action and making choices, women are the agents of their own development, where they are the subject. This is very unlike the conventional images and analysis, where not enough attention is paid to women's mind, which makes women the object of the development agenda. Thus collective resistance by women can be an effective way to liberate them selves from the chains of gender apartheid. In another seminal work *Women's Quest for Power, Vikas Publishing House, 1981*, basing her arguments on empirical observation from different regions across India, she argues that women often draw strength from the association of other women-shared identity objectifying the individual condition and so on. Also though income is a necessary but not sufficient condition for female emancipation, one of the levers to this emancipation is the strength women gain through participation in non-family associations.

similarities, and successful mobilization of women happens around issues that are the most crucial to them.

*Kamlesh Chauhan of the Jakh village in Garhwal when asked about what she thinks of women in leadership, replied, 'we want women leaders in substance not in numbers. She commented about the women pradhans-who are often controlled by their husbands (pati-pradhans) and said if they are many pati pradhans then there is no point in just concentrating in numbers.'*

*But, Hira Devi of Gongri village in Solan, Himachal Pradesh said that being the pradhana of the village does make a difference in reaching out to people and voicing issues of concern. She said when she goes for any work either in the village or the block, it is the status of pradhan which every one respects which in a way gives her the power to have a say on things. She said though she had initial problems in understanding the working of the panchayats, over a period of time she has been able to understand things. Hira Devi is presently the gram pradhana of village Gongri in Himachal. She belongs to a SC category and has helped a lot of widows and poor women (BPL) with schemes like Indra Awas Yojana. In her five year tenure she has also brought a road to the village and has been taking personal interest in solving domestic feuds between husband and wife. Most of the time she personally walks to their homes to make the husband understand to live more cordially and also tells the women if she is in the wrong. However Hira has been associated with mahila mandal and in fact was the first woman to initiate the idea of a mahila mandal bhawan. Hira says she was initially active in the mandal activities and in fact has donated her land to the mahila madal. As the land was registered under her husband's name she first persuaded and later took him along to the block office to fetch some money for the construction of the mahila mandal bhawan for which they got Rs 50,000. The mahila mandal started with an initial contribution of Rs 5. Today Hira is a confident pradhana, but feels that her biggest shortcoming is her being illiterate. Ten years before Hira had stood for the election as the Block development committee member, but lost it. The next time when she decided to stand for the elections had no great hopes. However she says unlike the last time she was not scared this time as she had told her self that she has nothing to lose even if she loses the election. Though Hira was not really expecting to win, when she came to know that she had won the elections, instead of feeling happy about it, she was rather tensed as she was not sure whether she will be able to bear the responsibilities.*

From interviews with individual women leaders, it became clear that effective women leaders have a sense of their space at both the private sphere and also the public sphere. The motivation for emergence of women leaders is the effort to advance both strategic and practical gender needs <sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Trying to bridge the division between mainstream feminists and the grass root development proponents many scholars have argued that, when women are organized into groups, it can by and large address both strategic(feminist ideology) and practical(grass root development ideology) needs of women. For instance, *Maitreyi Das* argues that Mahila Mandals (traditional local women organizations) have largely tended to address women practical gender needs, but also have enormous potential in addressing strategic gender needs. Similarly *Kalegaokar* makes an argument to accommodate the role of grass roots women's development agenda into the feminist agenda. She uses the distinction made by *Molyneux* between practical and strategic gender interests and says that meeting practical gender needs can serve as an invitation for the strategic needs to emerge. After studying basic pressing questions, women may often find the space to

*Pushpa Rawat, pradhan, Saneri village, Uttaranchal, was asked, what is the source of her strength? She answered that she always fights for what is right, and believes in the space for her own self. She said she believes in gender equality and that both men and women should be equal and should always stand by for what is right. She said even if her father in law will say something which is wrong, she will not consider or succumb to it.*

*Similarly Durga Bisht, of village Gughuti in Uttaranchal, shares a similar story, Durga had heard about the concept of mangal dal from others. Usually during Holi, the women collect and go to each house and sing songs. Durga took this as an opportunity and later mobilized women into groups to form the mangal dal. The money collected during the holi was saved as the common property of the village women. When the men in the village came to know about the money collected they started showing interest in the mangal dal and told the women to give the money to them. When the women refused, claiming the money to be their property, many men including her father in law opposed the formation of the mangal dal. The other village men tried to incite Durga's father in law, who under the influence of alcohol disowned her, in front of the village members. However Durga did not relent and instead told her father in law `mein to apki hi bahun hoon aur mera ghar bhi wahi hain, isliye mein apko chor kar kahin nahin jaoongi. (I am your daughter in law and the house where you stay is my house too and therefore she will not leave him and go anywhere).*

## **7. Role of Women's groups**

The fact that many of the women leaders spoken to were associated with a group of one kind or another is, in our view not just coincidence. Women's groups probably play an extremely important role in encouraging and enabling leadership. This kind of solidarity is inextricably linked with women's leadership. We feel this has important implications for any further study.

*Pushpa Rawat, Pradhan Saneri village believes that mangal dals are necessary as through it there is some accountability, on the women leaders. Also they act as a launch pad for the village women to speak out their views. She believes that training and information are important ingredients because it makes the women aware of their own rights and more receptive to the things happening around them.*

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envisage a more radical i.e. a strategic needs oriented agenda. However for the needs to be met in a sustained and a channelised way often an external catalyst is needed. *Naila Kabeer, 'Reversed Realities, Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought,' Kali for Women, 1994)* says forming women groups and involving them in participatory development, can empower women and help them attain both the goals of strategic and practical gender needs. As at the core of the development process, participation, initiative and active involvement of people is necessary group formation can be the first level of democratic action. This is because groups provide a forum for dialogue and discussion and contribute to the capacity of members to understand and find solutions to their problems. Second they build group confidence. Third they provide mechanisms to set agendas and choose the activities to be undertaken. Fourth, they provide a means to transform individual weakness collective strength, thus enhancing their bargaining power vis a vis the power structures. (*Maitreyi Das, 'Mahila Mandal and Gender Politics, Economic and Political Weekly, December 9,2000;Maitreyi Krisna Raj, 'Women and the Public Domain: Critical Issues for Women Studies, Economic and Political Weekly February 21,1998;Archana Kalegaokar, 'Pursuing Third World Women Interests: Compatibility of Feminism with the Grass Root Development', Economic and Political Weekly April 26,1997).*

Effective leadership can be debated in the context of governance structures. The main reason for this is the concept of individual agency *vis-a-vis* that of a structure. It is argued that leaders operate within structures and they both influence and are influenced by it. The extent to which a structure responds also depends on the extent to which it is free to respond. For example, if all the resources allocated to a Panchayat are tied up in pre specified schemes, the role of a leader in influencing allocations is severely curtailed.

Governance has been defined as 'the exercise of power, political, economic and administrative authority to manage a country's affairs'.<sup>12</sup> The study of leadership by women in different situations could help to shift attention towards processes that allow the emergence of leadership qualities, and the manner in which 'power' can be used to strengthen democracy and social equity.

During the field work it was seen that there is a continuum of structures, from the wholly formal to the wholly informal, which play a role as structures through which women's leadership is exercised. These include the mahila mangal dals and the mahila mandals; church groups; movement based groups such as the meira paibi; the panchayat raj institutions; etc.

'Structures of opportunity' can be defined as those channels, which enable women to come out of a purely personal realm into a space that allows them to address issues of livelihood, development, or state policy and action, in a direct or an indirect manner. The relevant structures of opportunity differ across states. Access to structures of opportunity, whether formal or informal, plays an important role in enabling leadership and mobilizing women.

Situational or contingency scholars<sup>13</sup> document idealized and universal personality traits and situations, and match the leader's orientation with certain organizational contexts or situations. The "essential" leader's personality traits are task-oriented (formal structures) rather than relationship-oriented (informal structures). The task-motivated leader performs best in both high and low situational controls. Relationship motivated leaders perform best in situations in which control is moderate. We can differentiate, thus between a leadership type that seeks a clear problem definition, with a clear solution and implementation, so that the leader's task becomes a technical one; and others that emphasize the fact that situations are rarely clear, problem definition itself requires learning, and any solution and implementation also requires learning, both on the part of the 'leader' and the 'follower'.

(One of the reasons why even though everyone would agree that social reality is complex, messy and uncertain, some would argue that it is still possible to define areas of action with technocratic solutions is perhaps a belief in the 'critical mass' theory.<sup>14</sup> )

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<sup>12</sup> Martha Nussbaum et al, *Essays on Gender and Governance*, UNDP, 2003. PP.4.

<sup>13</sup> Fiedler is one of the early writers on contingency theory, examining how a leader's personality or behavior affects leadership performance and situational theory, focusing on aspects of the organization or environment. Fiedler's conclusion is that leaders perform best in situations that match their leadership style

<sup>14</sup> The critical mass is a concept originally derived from nuclear physics and refers to the quantity needed to start an irreversible chain reaction. In context to the PRI it means that certain (30%) of women are needed in order to be able to effect change.

## 8. Special contribution of leaders who are women

Do we need women leaders, what is the significance of gender as against caste, class and other societal divisions? How is the idea of leadership linked to that of participation? Participation is at the core of social and political life and the greater the inability to participate, the greater the feeling of separation; the greater the feeling of separation, the more likely is estrangement and alienation.<sup>15</sup> Participation therefore is that process which allows women to identify their interests and concerns and empathize with them, even motivating them to take action.

*Ms Laisram Shanti told us that because of the present situation, the security forces can pick up any boy and she also has sons. She feels that she has to protect all the boys. If she is just a woman she has no voice, but with Meira Paibis she has a voice. Her life is has changed since she joined Meira Paibis. Earlier her husband restricted her but now she can speak boldly now. She can speak in a gathering.*

In the rural environment it was evident that women leader do make a difference. India being a patriarchal society, women are able to identify with a woman more easily. But there is an important distinction between 'effective' leaders and leaders per se. What are the main forces which activate and sustain leadership qualities? What is the catalyst that turns potential leaders into actual leaders? What role do external agents play in this aspect?

As these questions do not have easy answers, a study of women in leadership positions has to avoid exclusive focus on the women who are leaders, as this can risk the neglect of structural opportunities and obstacles to collective action (informal structures), while an emphasis on structures can risk under estimating the leaders *per se*. Also an emphasis on leaders can relegate the collectives to the category of followers.<sup>16</sup>

The gender of the person becomes important while discussing leadership qualities because women naturally respond to their lived realities. If women feel that their concerns can be addressed through their participation, they do mobilize and try to push their agendas. Raghavendra Chattopadhyaya and Esther Dufflo write that men and women will prefer policies that are likely to affect their bargaining power, or, the price of the goods they consume will reflect their different policy preferences. Explaining further, they write that women will prefer programmes that increase women's opportunity or their productivity on their tasks, while men will prefer programmes that improve men's opportunity and productivity.<sup>17</sup> However these policy preferences will depend on the visibility which women are able to provide to their issues. Effective women leaders

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<sup>15</sup> Anjali Capila, *Images of Women in The Folk Song of Garhwal Himalayas, A Participatory Approach* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company). Pp84-87. Anjali Capila has argued this definition of participation.

<sup>16</sup> The ideas have been developed from, Aldon Morris and Suzanne Staggenborg, *Leadership in Social Movements*, November, 2002. available at <http://www.cas.northwestern.edu/sociology/faculty/files/leadershipessay.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> Raghavendra Chattopadhyaya and Esther Dufflo in *Women as Policy Makers: Evidence from an India-Wide Randomized Policy Experiment*, *Poverty Action Lab Paper No.1, March, 2003*, Pp 10.

become necessary in this context and informal structures can play an indispensable role in providing this platform for women by providing transformational style of leadership.

## 9. The North East: Traditional Systems

The relationship between the ethnic conflicts and women's peace building roles, effective women collectives like Meira Paibies and women representatives needs to be explored further. Ethnicity is the main factor, which emerged in Manipur and Meghalaya, as a factor dividing women into different groups. The main reason for this can be as one scholar says is the development of the consciousness, which is the basis of such an identity and the values attached with what the communities in the North –East claim to be their traditions.<sup>18</sup> Though the district councils began at the time of undivided Assam, the oldest district councils, known as *dorbars* in the country are found in Meghalaya. The District Councils along with the legislature of the State and political leadership which are controlled by the three major tribes of Meghalaya: Khasi, Jaintia and Garo are dominated by the tribal communities.<sup>19</sup> *Asilie Pusa* points out that the definition of tribe, which is inherent in the constitutional position, is based on a process of identification introduced by the British administrators whose view was to give such groups political concessions. This form of identification alleged that when a group appeared to be clearly Hindu it was defined as a caste, and when it was 'animist' it was classified as a tribe, it had nothing to do with the stages of development.<sup>20</sup> Quoting Udayon Misra, Apurba .K. Baruah argues that Meghalaya is inhabited by a large number of communities who identify them selves as tribes and has been in the news because of insurgent violence and ethnic movements. Attempts in understanding these incidents have so far been limited to examining rebellious and ethnic violence in terms of nationality aspirations. The point which according to her needs further examination is that whether such conflicts are generated by a clash of values, inherent in the traditional political practices but manifested in the modern context. Therefore the question which becomes relevant to her is the reconsideration of the fact that in most of these societies, institutional arrangement of the pre-constitutional and the pre-liberal democratic era continue to function along side the government of the democratic republic, established in 1950. These traditional structures need to be examined more carefully with a focus on the opportunities and constraints to women's leadership roles that are present.

Despite the limitations of the scoping paper, even a cursory comparison of women's leadership does draw attention to the role of the larger cultural milieu in inhibiting or facilitating women's leadership. In this regard the role of Meitie women of Manipur in leading the protest against state policies, in the past as well as the present needs analysis. In comparison, the Khasi women of Meghalaya, who are matrilineal, do not show difference from their other patriarchal counterparts, nor is such a strong and sustained

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<sup>18</sup> Apurba.K.Baruah. ` *Tribal Traditions and Crises of Governance in North-East India, with special reference to Meghalaya*, Crises States Programme, Working Paper Series No.22, March 2003.

<sup>19</sup> National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution, Empowering and Strengthening of Panchayati Raj Institutions/Autonomous District Councils/Traditional tribal governing institutions in North East India, New Delhi, 2001.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Apurba.K.Baruah. ` *Tribal Traditions and Crises of Governance in North-East India, with special reference to Meghalaya*, Crises States Programme, Working Paper Series No.22, March 2003.pp 4.



women's protest over social and political issues seen in other ethnic communities of the state. Whether this is linked to other issues such as greater mobility for Meitie women, their role in trade and the ensuing economic power, or other political factors needs to be examined. The nude protest that the Meira Paibis held against the rape and brutal murder of Manorama, has no equivalent in the history of women's movement in India. It reflects the space and the leadership that the Meira Paibis have carved out for themselves in society.

The recently released Nagaland Human Development Report suggests that 'active women's participation in the Village Councils, traditionally a male domain, has been reported from some villages...'.<sup>21</sup> It would be important to examine the potential of traditional structures and to minimize patterns of change that lead to further conflict between 'tradition' and 'modernity'.

### **10. External Agents**

The role played by external agents also requires closer study. There are many different 'types' of external agents – some who seek to introduce a pre-determined agenda, others who see their role as facilitating and supporting the emergence of locally developed programmes. The implications and outcomes, from the perspective of leadership, needs to be documented and studied further.

**In conclusion, on the basis of this preliminary exploration, we feel that a study of women's leadership could usefully proceed by developing more detailed profiles of women in leadership positions, developed through a longer period of interaction than was possible for us to do here; that each of these profiles needs to be contextualized against the background and context of the place, its geographical location, political and economic history, etc; that the role of collectives of different kinds, including traditional institutions and newer groups, would be valuable as a supplement to the profiles themselves.**

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<sup>21</sup> Nagaland: State Human Development Report 2004 p.155

## **Anne x: Profiles of Women in Leadership Positions**

### **Profiles from Solan, Himachal Pradesh**

These interviews took place in district Solan of Himachal Pradesh. Solan is flanked by Chandigarh, Punjab and Haryana. The culture of Solan is very much influenced by the Punjabi culture, due to its proximity with the neighbor states. Most of the villages in Solan have considerable commercial-industrial activity and are well connected to urban centres through an extensive network of roads. The women interviewed were from different caste groups including Brahmins, Rajputs and Dalits. Most of the men are working in factories in nearby cities, some are farmers. The women were aware of their political rights and responsibilities, but only a few saw themselves as actual 'leaders'. Only one woman, who was a BDC member, said that she is a leader, with a potential to mobilize people. However the women said that they go to attend Gram-Sabha meetings and speak out to voice their views. The women's groups here are known as 'mahila mandak', and are famous for their collective voice on many issues.

The women were interviewed in Jagjit Nagar, District Solan. They were from nearby villages, including Khajret, Garhkhal (town), Gongri, Ramshehar (town), Badayu. We were able to meet and talk with them as SUTRA workers kindly gave us an introduction.

**Name: Kamlesh Chauhan**

**Education: Class Eight**

**Designation: Secretary, Mahila Mandal.**

**Village: Khajret**

Kamlesh has been associated with the Mahila Mandal since she got married. She has studied till class eight and her husband has been the pradhan for 10 years. He is now a driver, and has his own car. Kamlesh has been associated with the mahila mandal for the last 23 years. The Khajret mahila mandal as it is known in the village was established in 1983 and since then has won many battles. Though Kamlesh has a job at the post office, her husband takes care of the job, while she says she spends most of her time looking after the work of the mahila mandal.

Kamlesh gave a brief history of the mahila mandal and the work it undertakes. She said initially there was no support for the mandals in the village and they were referred by the people as vella (no work) dals. However the women did not give up and when they were able to get a grant from the government to construct the *Mahila Mandal Bhawan*, people in the villages were impressed and began to take more notice, believing that the mahila mandal is an active group capable of doing things.

The mandal works through the written application it receives from women in the villages and then takes action. The accountability factor of the mandals is strong, and women in the village have faith in it. Cases of domestic violence, adultery and rape are registered. In most of the cases that have been solved by the mandals, women have been compensated. For instance in one of the cases, a man abused a woman openly in the village, the women pleaded to the mahila mandals. When the mandal leaders came to know of this they went to the man and talked to him individually. The man later came to the mahila *mandal bhawan*, and apologized in front of all women. The women go to the panchayats, if anyone refuses to accept what the mandal has to say. This is particularly in those cases where the women feel the issue is important. Kamlesh said if the mahila mandal feels, it has a point to make, it goes ahead and speaks in a collective voice and admitted that when women speak in a collective voice they do get heard. She said the nyaya panchayat is equally consulted when the mandal feels that the problem is beyond their control.

Some money was given by the panchayats for the construction of the mahila mandal bhawan. The remaining work was done by the women through shramdaan (voluntary labour). However the women did not work throughout the day but went in those hours when they are relatively free at home.

The mahila mandal is an organized unit and people over a period of time have started taking notice of it. She said many a times people have thought that as a mandal member she gets something therefore she devotes her time to the village. However later when they saw the good work mandal had done they have started supporting the group over time and even started looking up to her.

As far as the election of the pradhan either in mahila mandals or the panchayats is concerned, personal equations generally determine who will be the leader. The women who are capable of handling the affairs and are ready to cooperate and take responsibility are often the leaders.

Even men have started approaching the mahila mandals to solve the problems which they have. The reason for this is the commitment with which the women do their work. When the interviews were taking place the most burning problem in all the villages were the presence of monkeys, which have migrated into the rural areas from cities like Shimla, the *mahila mandals* decided to deal with the issue by guarding the farms, (Bandar Bari) with different women taking turns.

**Name: Nanki Devi**

**Education: Illiterate**

**Designation: Pradhan, Mahila Mandal.**

**Village: Grahkhal. (Dharam Pur Block)**

Nanki Devi is the pradhan of a mandal dal in Garhkhal, which is a township 56 km from Jagjitnagar. The village is well connected to the roads, and the mahila mandal in this village is 20 years old. The women avail various schemes of the government and most of them are tied to it because of their practical needs. However before the formation of several self-help groups, the mahila mandals had a stronger identity. The members of the mahila mandals are generally from one village, and are united through the immediate issues in the village. Thus where the long term goal is financial security, there the short term goals are the issues that confront women in their day to day struggles. The mandal takes issues of domestic violence, deserted women, dowry and personal feuds.

Nanki Devi is almost 60 years old, and despite her age heads the mahila mandal. When asked why doesn't she quit the post and let someone younger take the lead, she says there is no one good enough to lead right now. Another reason is that women trust her and do not want her to quit the responsibility.

Nanki has seen a tough life. When her eldest son was in Class 10 her husband died in a sudden accident. Then she had just seven rupees in her hand. Though the factory owner had promised a job to her son, after her husband's death, the job was not given to him as he failed in his board examination. Nanki said there were so many things to do after her husband's death, that he did not get time to do serious study.

Nanki had four other children to look after and none of her relatives supported her. In order to earn a living she used to take coal from the factory at wee hours and sell it in the market. The money saved from selling coal was invested in buying and raising animals. When asked how did she get the vision, or what was the support system that directed her, she replied that when you have courage you can do anything and when a person does not have anything, she has to think of various things on her own to open up a path for herself. Nanki said she thought day and night on how to support herself and her family and though she took loans she always wondered whether

she had the resources to pay them back. Nanki took loans from various government schemes and SUTRA, the NGO working in that area. She said she had to generate money to pay back her loans and for this she worked extra hard to fulfill her responsibilities.

Her husband used to respect her a lot when he was alive and she used to take all the decisions at home.

The *mahila mandal* was formed under her leadership. She said an officer from the forest department had approached her and said that if a *mahila mandal* could be formed in the village, they could plant some trees and get money for their labour. As there was no *mahila mandal* existing in the village then, Nanki talked to two or three women who used to go to other villages for the meetings. On her initiative the *mahila mandal* was formed. Initially the women used the grass for self-consumption but later they started selling the grass, dividing the money amongst them.

She used to see the late night show of religious films in the theater. During the day time she used to work. She said the films used to inspire and encourage her and give her strength. Her daughters did not study at all as they used to help her in the household work. She says despite all her struggles, she used to find out time for doing the mandal activities. She says through your own efforts you have to fight your own way. She believes in Guru Bias and says she goes every year to Punjab, for a spiritual trip. Her belief in god is strong as she says she always heard her inner voice, which showed her the direction during tough times. Though Nanki is illiterate, she can write her name now. She said she learnt it from her grand-children.

Often the village women approach her to solve their own problems and Nanki does her utmost to solve them as she says she does not want any woman to suffer the same way she has in her life. She has made effective interventions in cases relating to domestic violence. Once when a woman in her neighborhood was being beaten by her husband, she took the ward member along with her to intervene. Also she informed the police through the phone. She said often when cases like these happen, women come and confide in her, on which she goes individually to their house to talk with the husband of the women. She says men fear her and usually understand, when there is someone to explain. Only in extreme cases when she feels that the man will not pay any heed to her advice, does she involve the police in domestic matters.

She asserts that if women have the courage they can do anything. Remembering her days she says when she was alone; she used to bow down to mother earth every morning and pray for her protection. There were times when she was alone, but now she is well off.; her sons are settled and her daughters married. Every one in the village knows her and they also respect her for her struggles.

She believes potential leadership qualities emerge when there is no one around to help you. She compares her struggles with the present mahila mandal members and feels that today the women have too much of external support, but still they do not struggle with problems.

From the money collected the mahila mandal has brought utensils, chairs and musical instruments. However unlike other mandals all of them are in the name of gram sabha, as she does not want that later the members of the mandals should fight over them.

**Name: Hira Devi**

**Education: Class five**

**Designation: Panchayat Pradhan, (SC candidate) Saloi Gram Panchayat**

**Village: Gongri**

Hira Devi is around fifty years old and was earlier the pradhan of the mahila mandal. The mahila mandal of the village is around nineteen years old and Hira Devi was the first woman to take the

initiative in setting it up. Villages in Himachal are often caste-based and in the village where Hira resides, all the residents are scheduled castes. Hira says when the *gram sevika* from the block approached her, to form a mahila mandal, she came to know about the benefits which scheduled castes can avail.

Her husband was a labourer and passed away some years back. She lives with her daughters in law. Hira feels confident of being the pradhan at the end of her five year term, though she feels one of the main obstacles that came her way was her being illiterate. She feels education is very important as it helps you to understand clearly the various schemes and policies of the government. However she says she has been lucky enough to have a very supportive secretary, *Ram Swaroop*, who is very helpful and facilitates her work to a great extent.

Hira says she was initially active in the mandal activities and in fact has donated her land to the mahila mandal. As the land was registered under her husband's name she first persuaded and later took him along to the block office to fetch some money for the construction of the *mahila mandal* bhawan for which they got *Rs 50,000*. The mahila mandal started with an initial contribution of *Rs 5*. Later they got support from SUTRA and came to know about the various pro-poor schemes of the government. Ten years before Hira had stood for the election as the Block Development Committee member, but lost it. The next time when she decided to stand for the elections she had no great hopes. However she says unlike the last time she was not scared this time as she had told herself that she has nothing to lose even if she loses the election. Though Hira was not really expecting to win, when she came to know that she had won the elections, instead of feeling happy about it, she was rather tense as she was not sure whether she will be able to manage the responsibilities.

Does being a pradhan matter was the next question which was asked to Hira, to which she gave an affirmative reply. She said when she goes for any work either in the village or the block, it is the status of pradhan which every one respects which in a way gives her the power to have a say on things. She said though she had initial problems in understanding the working of the panchayats, over a period of time she has been able to understand things. Awareness raising camps, training courses for pradhans and her association with the *mahila mandals* have played an important role in her empowerment as the pradhan. Hira says she has helped many women below poverty line and has made many schemes like the Indira Awas Yojana available to villagers. She says it almost took two years for her to understand the workings of the scheme per se. She regularly goes for the meetings which are to be attended and says that there is no discrimination faced by her on the basis of caste.

As audits are done regularly, there is not much scope for corruption, as she has to show what work has been done in the village. She has built the road to the village and she says the village people will remember her for doing good work. She feels the need for training and information that is generally given to pradhans as she emphasizes that it plays a significant role in informing women about the ways and the means to deliver responsibilities which have been given to them.

**Name: Daya Sharma**  
**Education: Class Eight**  
**Designation: Ward Member**  
**Village: Khajret**

Daya Sharma, is the ward member and is also the pradhan of the mahila mandal in Khajret. As the mahila mandal is seventeen years old her training has been in the mandal where she was an active member. When she joined the mandal the chanda (monthly contribution) was *Rs 2/-*. On asking why she was chosen for the post, she says she had been articulate and ready to fight for others. She cited the example of one of the incidents when she along with some women had

boarded the bus. The conductor abused the women for some reason, which offended the women greatly. Daya took personal initiative to take this matter and made the conductor (who was from the same village) apologize to the women in front of the public.

Similarly citing another case she says, once a bank employee had misbehaved with a person who had gone to deposit the pass books of the mahila mandal. The bank employee passed a comment, which was condescending in tone to the identity of the *mahila mandal*. The boy went home insulted. When the mahila mandal came to know about it, they decided to take up this issue and follow it up. On the recommendation of the secretary of the *mahila mandal*, who used to work initially with SUTRA, they wrote to the head-office and informed about the misbehavior of the bank employee. The application worked and soon the bank employee was given order from above to rectify his behavior.

With these precedents the Mahila Mandal in Khajret is feared by many people, who now think twice before abusing or talking rudely to women.

Initially Daya did not know what the panchayats were like. However because the women knew about her they approached her to stand for the post of the ward member. As Daya was unopposed, she won.

As the ward member Daya had initiated building a road to a SC village, where no one even thought of taking roads before. To take a firm stand on this Daya had to fight the Rajputs who wanted the road to their own village.

She said most of the cases in the panchayats are relating to the disputes regarding the husband and the wife and women generally don't hesitate bringing the cases to the panchayats. Regarding corruption, she says men are more corrupt than women and generally the women do their work more honestly and are more committed than the men are. She said as a woman she generally does not face discrimination as the pradhan and the secretary generally listen to the points she makes. Also the cases which relate to women are given to her. She says she wants to stand for the post of the pradhan now and has in fact challenged the pradhan..

Daya's husband is a factory worker and her in laws are extremely supportive of her work. In fact she says had it not been the support of her in-laws she would have never been able to work for the village women. She considers SUTRA a major factor in generating awareness as after being associated with it, the women became aware and informed about the various things, which were unknown to them before.

She has dug composting pits and water reservoirs. She says that even an animal lives for itself, what is the difference between the animal and the man if even the man just thinks about him-self..

She said she was encouraged always at home to study further but she decided to quit as she thought that her mother needs her at home. Her motto is if the mahila mandal takes responsibility, it does it with full dedication.

**Name: Meena Kumari**

**Education: Class five**

**Designation: Ward Member**

**Village: Ram Shehar**

As a child Meena wanted to do a job but as girls never studied, her dream never got fulfilled. At the age of 18, she got married, and after two years of her marriage, she got separated from her in-laws, after which she and her husband had to fend on their own. Her husband soon started a tailor shop and she brought some animals as she thought selling out milk would be profitable. After

some time when they had attained some financial stability she made a brick shed for keeping the animals and further bought two cows to raise money.

Meena was a member of the mandal and through it she came to know to know about SUTRA. Her visits to SUTRA were quite frequent, as the distance was not a problem because SUTRA had its head office at Chachi, which was near to Ramshahar, the place where she resides. With her association with SUTRA and the local field workers associated with it, she came to know about the loans which the women could access. Initially she borrowed five thousand. As she became an active member, her visits to Sutra also increased. Soon she was chosen as the pradhan (head) of the Mandal. On asking why the women chose her to head the mandal, and later as the ward member, she said she used to speak to every body, was amicable in her behaviour and the women must have thought that she is approachable, honest and dedicated. She cited one of the examples when once she rescued the girl, who had fallen into the dry well. Also she is fearless and is not shy to put her point across in front of public. Admitting that it was a difficult question to answer she said, women must have elected her because she was considered to be person of 'daya – dharam' (kind-hearted).

However her real problems started when she became the ward member. As she had been active in her area, and was articulate in voicing her concerns, she was charged with occupying land illegally in front of her house. She said before being a ward member, she was not even questioned and all this *politics* came only when she became the ward member.

Roads and cleaning the drains have been two activities where she has a made a difference. Once when she did not go for the Panchayat meetings the pradhan gave the work which was to be given to her, to another ward member. Later when she found out and questioned the pradhana she discovered that under her name someone else had signed for her.

Her husband is non-interfering and does not know any thing about her meetings. She said as most of her time she is out of her home, most of the household work is being done by her husband, and he doesn't mind it. She said had it not been for her husband's support, she wouldn't have been able to come this far.

She said she is slowly learning politics and knows how to deal with it now. Without Sutra she said, it would have been impossible for her to come out and go so far.

As most of the time she is out of her house, her daughter often tells her to stay at her own house, and not go out of her way to help people. On asking whether women make a difference in politics she replied in affirmative and said *that men go with the attitude of alliances and votes, whereas women go with feelings towards others. She also said men always talk about politics and often development is not their purpose.* On further asking whether her being a woman she has made a difference, she cited an incident when one man, who had three sons married another woman . His case was registered in the panchayat and she being the ward member, went personally to his house, to make the man aware of the consequences of his actions.

**Name: Rajrani**

**Education: Class Ten**

**Designation: Block Samiti Member**

**Village: Ram Shehar**

Educated till class ten, Rajrani didn't study further due to her family circumstances. Her father died suddenly and being the eldest daughter, she soon got married.

After she got married, her mother started staying with her, and a woman in her village told her about SUTRA where women were being sent for training. As she went for the training later,

Rajrani learnt many new things which she had not known earlier. After the training from SUTRA, a *mahila mandal* was set up in the village and soon organized literacy camps where women could learn how to write their names and read.

Before joining the mandal, Rajraji did not know any thing about the elections. One day when she had gone out for some work, she saw some people filling in the forms. When she asked what the forms were all about, she was told that they were forms for the Block Samiti Member. One man remarked sarcastically that one needs guts to stand for elections, and experience too. Rajrani was offended by his tone and though she did not say any thing there, when she came home, she decided to stand for the elections. Her competitors were all six male candidates, but that did not deter her.

For campaigning she used to cook food for other women who used to accompany her and used to walk it down to different village and convince people of her own credibility. She finally won by 882 votes.

She said Durga Thapa was the main motivator for her as she kept on telling her to stand for elections. Since the election, she has made many women access the IRDP scheme and built *bhauri's* (dry wells) in the village. Also she has been the facilitator in various cases of marital discord. She said she always talks both to the man and the woman separately before talking to them together. After becoming the ward member she never stopped going to the field. She said she was never scared of speaking out and till now when ever she feels someone is saying something wrong she speaks out. She says often people complain that the Block Development Committee members don't do any work; however in her area no one can say this as she has delivered her responsibility conscientiously. She said people approach her directly. She admitted that men are jealous of her and often when they say something sarcastically or ironically, she knows how to reply them back.

Her husband is very cooperative and often helps her in the house-hold work. He does not interfere with her work at all. She tells him if she is not doing any thing wrong why should he say something about her, only when she is wrong in any thing can she be judged for her behavior. Through her behavior, she has earned respect in the village, and is loved by the public for her work. On asking whether she perceives her self as the leader, Rajrani said that she does and aims to go further in politics.

**Name: Tulsi Sharma**

**Education: Illiterate**

**Designation: Pradhan (Mahila Mandal)**

**Village: Diggal village.**

Tulsi Sharma was married to a widower when he was 50 and she was fifteen. After four years of her marriage her husband died. Tulsi was well-off, therefore did not have any problem fending for herself, as she had a lot of land, which she had leased out to other people, to earn a living. Tulsi's only wish was to have a child of her own, because of which she used to be depressed all the time. She recalled as she proceeded further to share the story of her life that she went to various temples. With all the mental strain her health started deteriorating, and she was taken to various doctors. Her relatives were thinking that probably she would go mad. It was at this phase of her life that she was introduced to the mandal. As an active member of the mahila mandal she has been associated with it for 22-23 years. Tulsi says, mahila mandal was an effective distraction for her and she liked helping others because it used to give her peace and happiness. She said through helping others she is improving her own karma (deeds), as she must have done something wrong in her past life that she witnessed so many hardships in this life. Today Tulsi is the pradhan of the mahila mandal. On why people chose her as the pradhan of the mandal, she said



that she knew how to talk and deal with the men of the village. Tulsi had given some of her land for the mahila mandal building and later through her own initiative went to the block office to get money so that a building could be made. She was successful in getting Rs 50,000 from the block office. In the last 15-20 years she has helped open child care centers in the village, has paved roads through her own efforts by providing shram daan (voluntary labour), along with other women in the village. She said the men of the village were so ashamed that they later joined them. Also she has been successful in providing widow pensions to some 50-60 women in the village. She also mentioned that sometimes she spends money from her own pocket if there is a need for it. On asking why she doesn't stand for elections, Tulsi said that she is happy like this, and also for standing for panchayat elections, one has to be literate, which unfortunately, she is not.

As she has been successful in helping women through her own efforts, people often talk about her, that she has a distorted character and that she maintains relations with various men. However she says that she is not deterred by it as she has done nothing wrong and therefore she doesn't feel bad about it, because she is clear about the work she is doing.

**Name: Mamta Devi(SC)**

**Education: Illiterate**

**Designation: Pradhan(Mahila Mandal)**

**Village: Badayu village.**

Mamta has been associated with the *mahila mandal* for the past 25 years. When the mandal was formed they were only 10 members and when she joined the mandal she did not have any money as the women were supposed to give the monthly chanda (fee) for the mandal, she often use to save money on her own whenever she used to get a chance. Mandal helped her economically and made loans available to her. She said from the loans drawn she brought buffaloes, and then sold milk to raise her income level. The only reason why she is attached to the mandal is because of the money she can access, as this the immediate necessity of the people today.

In Himachal villages are caste based, and as no rajput women existed in the group, a question on prevailing caste conflict was asked. To this, Mamta Devi, replied there is as such no caste conflict between the women. When asked whether, the Rajput women come for activities, she replied in the negative. On further asking she replied that their men stop them and tell them that we don't have any work, therefore we are associated with the mandal. Also she said that Rajput women have more work because they have more land.

Getting associated with the mandal she has come to know about other things such as the laws which exist. The mandal is also helpful in providing other facilities and is an effective support structure in times of need.

Her husband has been extremely supportive and does not say anything about her joining the mandal.

Initially when they did not have enough money and means of transport, all the fruits used to rot, therefore they never thought of selling fruits in the markets. Since ten years they have seen great improvements and now they even grow fruits and vegetables which add to their improved levels of income.

**Name: Mamta Devi(SC)**  
**Education:Five**  
**Designation: Pradhan(Mahila Mandal)**  
**Village: Badayu village.**

Mamta Devi has seen hardships throughout her life. She had eight brothers and two sisters. At the age of fifteen she got married, and has four children. She faced a problem at her in-laws place as her husband did nothing. She not only looked after him but also did all the work on her own. When she got associated with the mandal, it was 1982. She soon became active and started appreciating the information she started gaining through her association with the group. As the villages are caste based, the rajputs used to stay at the other side of the villages. Initially the rajput and the SC women attended meetings together and the venue for the meetings used to be at the rajput's house. Mamta was quite active and was the president of the mandal. However one morning she was raped by a rajput man. After that things changed for her. She took this issue to SUTRA, the local NGO working in the area. Soon she filed the case in the court, for which she took a loan of Rs 2,500/-. Though she won the case, it was taken to the high court and the culprit is now roaming scot-free.

She says she neither has time nor the money to fight the case. However the rajput women don't talk with the SC now and none of them are in the mandal.

Malti stood for the elections, but later withdrew her name as she knew she would lose as the rajputs were any way against her. Two women stood against her and the candidate she had supported lost. Instead Lakshmi Devi won who was supported by the Rajputs. When Laxmi Devi was later met, she said there is no discrimination on the basis of caste at all.

Mamta says poverty is the main cause for all her hardships. Her community members also do not come to help her because they think that if they help them, they will have to pay money from their own pocket

#### **Profiles from Almora, Dwarahaat and Karnaprayag, Uttarakhand**

Two areas Almora and Dwarahaat, in Kumaon, and Karnaprayag in Garhwal, were visited in Uttarakhand. The villages were in the interiors and not well connected to the existing road network. Only jeeps could be used. As the villages were quite far- away from the main road, one had to walk 10-12 kms to reach the village. In Kumaon, the villages visited were Shilling, Chaura, Maichun, Saneri, and Gughuti. In Garhwal the villages where women were interviewed were, Jakh and Sundargaon. Mahila Mangal Dals were older and better established in Kumaon than in Garhwal. We were able to meet and talk to women here through the introduction given by the Uttarakhand Sewa Nidhi.

These villages formed a scattered settlement pattern, combined with a rough terrain, and scattered across the hills. There are no roads connecting one village to other and travel and transportation is difficult. One has to walk up slope and sometimes down slope for one or two hours (sometimes more) from the road, to reach the villages. Communication and information sharing between villages therefore become very difficult. Women are however mobile and not restricted to the four walls of the house. Their daily chores are such that they have to move out of the house and fulfill their responsibilities. The top priority for women is to ensure fodder, fuel and water for the home: that grass, leaves and fire-wood is collected, and animals taken care of.

**Name: Vimala Banola**  
**Age: 27 yrs**  
**Village: Maichun**  
**District: Almora (Kumaon),Uttarakhand.**

**Designation: Adhyaksha (Head) Mahila Mangal Dal**

**Education: Class Twelve.**

Vimala is a young woman and has three kids. She got married at the age of twenty-one. Her husband lives in Delhi and prior to marriage even she resided in Delhi. Now she lives with her in-laws and helps them with the household work. When asked about the leadership qualities that she has, Vimla says that it is the collective leadership that is the focus of the *mangal dals* and she did not consider herself a leader. However another woman quite senior in age, who was sitting beside her when the interview was held, said that the younger generation does not feel shy and hesitant in talking about the issues in front of village men. Infact this is one of the main reasons that Vimla, much younger to her and other mangal dal members has been chosen as the leader. However as for Vimala, she does not see herself as a leader, as for her, life has been a set of compromises at different stages.

As the identity of the leader in the Maichun village was inseparable from that of the *Mangal Dal*, the rest of the interview was focused on the activities that the mangal dal has done. The mangal dal in the village has made collective rules, which apply to all the members. These rules relate to the involvement of the women in the development activities relating to the village. Some of the areas where the *Mangal Dal* has succeeded are:

- (a) Developing Nurseries
- (b) Guarding Forests(also known as Hathbandi)
- (c) Fighting Alcoholism
- (d) Building a *balwadi* (school for children from 3-8 years).

When asked about the cooperation of the men in the village, she said men are very cooperative and it is because of their encouragement that women could think on the lines of development of the village. The clear message which came from her was that if the men do not want the ir wife to participate in the meetings they couldn't.

When asked about mangal dals participation in the panchayat meetings, she said their work and the Panchayats work is different. This reflects the separate issues, functions and the roles that the mangal dals perform vis a vis that of village panchayats. Another reason was that when the panchayat meetings are held, women have to leave their homes and their work, which in retrospect becomes inconvenient because the *panchayat ghar* is too far from their village. However the men do participate in the meeting. She said if the dal feels that the panchayat decisions are not related to the development of the village, they collectively oppose it. The men generally keep them informed about the decisions of the panchayat. The men do not oppose the decisions taken by the dal.

The mangal dal meetings are held every month and Vimala gets full support to carry out activities as the adhyaksha from her inlaws. Her family is respected in the village as father in law has donated land for the balwadi, where the children learn many things.

The strength of the mangal dal is the support structure it provides in the form of community decision-making. Also, rather than going to panchayats to resolve disputes, the women prefer to resolve it through the mangal dal. The meetings are productive according to Vimala because it involves the women and serves as a platform for information sharing.

Men do try to share the work with women. For instance when the balwadi was built -men carried the stones and the women constructed the wall. The roof was sponsored by the UKSN. Vimala says the issues that concern them most are those of 'Jal, Jungle and Jameen'.

**Name: Kamlesh Chauhan**

**Age: 37 yrs**

**Village: Jakh**

**District: Almora (Kumaon), Uttarakhand.**

**Designation: Adhyaksha (Head) Mahila Mangal Dal**

**Education: Class Twelve.**

Mahila Mangal Dal in Jakh was formed in 1995 and since then has had two presidents. Kamlesh is the second president (*adhyaksha*). She hails from Himachal and married a Garhwali, when she was in Delhi. After marriage she came to Garhwal, while her husband, who is in the army, stays outside. At present she is residing in Garhwal along with her four children.

She said decisions by *Mahila Mangal Dal* are consensus based and every one participates when discussing the issues concerning the village. On asking how the different issues are reconciled, she said the issues are prioritized on consensus basis and then each is taken individually. Some of the issues which are dealt by the *Mangal Dals* are: guarding the farms and alcohol consumption by men. Infact alcohol is the main problem that the mangal dal is dealing with right now. She said women generally talk about these issues and if a man creates a mess or abuses in public the women go and talk to him. This has worked as many men have stopped drinking in public and abusing loudly, which was the most common scene before.

Kamlesh feels strongly that women have to take a stand at home before they go out and talk in the public against the men indulging in drinking. She asserts that even the daughters need to speak at home against the fathers if they drink and come home and said she encourages her daughter to speak against her father, as she believes only when girls are allowed to speak before marriage can they speak after marriage.

When asked how she manages the Mahila Mangal Dal meetings along with the house work she said her daughter helps a great deal at the housework too. She said mangal dals are not caste based, as shown in her own experience, she coming from Himachal did not have any problems mingling with the women. Infact she says it does not come in-between her heading the mangal dal at all.

When asked about what she thinks of women leadership, she said we want women leaders in substance not in numbers. She commented about the women pradhans-who are often controlled by their husbands (pati-pradhans) and said if they are many pati pradhans then there is no point in just concentrating on numbers.

She said mangal dals can play a great role in the development of the villages but they need a support structure, which can guide them and provide them with a vision. She was negative about the participation of the women in the panchayat meetings as most of the women do not understand what is being talked there. This is the main reason why women do not make any effort to find time and attend the meetings.

As far as the initiatives that women in the mangal dals have taken, she said the village women have helped in the construction of the temple, through shram daan (voluntary service).

When asked what is the criteria of choosing a women leader, she said only those women generally emerge as leaders who can speak in the public and can articulate the ideas and concerns of the women. Also the need for the Mangal Dal was emphasized because most of the women felt that collectives often give visibility to women concerns and issues as their work generally revolves around the development of the village. Most of the women members of the Mangal Dal felt that usually if just one woman speaks about an issue, it is not heard and paid attention to, but when many women speak about the same issue, the men also pay attention to what women have to say.

There is not so much of gender divide on the work that men and women do, as the men of Garhwal plough the fields and even get water from distant places. The girls are generally being educated till class 10 and most of them also go to do their bachelors to the local university at Karnaprayag. The development of the village is the main focus as there are no roads and generally villages are 5-6 kms away from each other. This poses a problem on the development schemes which are planned for the region as the population of the villages is the determinant for the number of villages to be included in the gram sabha. The relationship between the villagers and the demographic profile of the villages is the main determinant of the developmental activity in the region. This problem was particularly seen in the village of Jakh, which has the biggest population as compared with the other two villages, which along with it come under one gram sabha. The size of the population demands more resources due to which the villages are in constant struggle with each other.

This interview was taken in Uttarakhand Sewa Nidhi, Almora (Kumaon) where the women had come for a training course. However after some days, we went to the village Jakh(Garhwal). The sanitation conditions in the village were bad and the mangal dal had been unable to improve the situation. When we had a mangal dal meeting, it was found that the dal was not yet fully united and the spirit to focus on the development of the village was missing.

However the women were keen to meet us, as they thought we will give them some ideas and vision regarding the village. Kamlesh was very active during the discussion and was urging the women to hear what we had to say. The women said they are ready to work in cohesion, but they want someone to guide and provide them with a vision.

Gram sabha in the village does not take place. This feature is common all across the region, and the village men are also frustrated with it. Corruption regarding the money is rampant and for tokenism, the panchayat members meet on their own to settle money matters. Most of the women felt there is no agency to deal with such issues and felt that if the mangal dal could be strengthened through 'some' external support they could work for the development of the village on their own.

**Name: Janaki Kantpal**

**Age: 40yrs**

**Village: Rana**

**District: Almora (Kumaon), Uttaranchal.**

**Designation: Adhyaksha (Head) *Mahila Mangal Dal*(lost panchayat elections)**

**Education: Class Eight.**

Janaki Kantpal is a Mangal Dal president and has been associated with it for the last four to five years. The Mangal Dal in the village of Rana, which is situated in Dwarahaat, Almora, started with a local balwadi, where often women came to drop their children in the morning before going to work in the field. Before the balwadi was formed the women used to tie their children at home, before going to work, as their used to be no one to look after them (this system of tying children like animals had been common amongst all the villages in Uttaranchal). The balwadis were a boon for the women as their children had a place to stay. Later as more children came, the balwadis became the main nodal point to introduce the concept of mangal dals. Janaaki had been the main actor to mobilize women to send their children to the balwaadi.

However soon the *balwadi* closed as the government opened an aanganwadi in the village. The efforts of Janaki remained unrecognized as she was the main person who went to each house in the village to cajole the women to send their children, a concept which was alien to most of them initially. However Janaki did not give up hope and through the help of a local NGO called SEED, evening centers called sandhya kendras started. Sandhya Kendras are playing the role which the

balwaadis initially used to perform. In the evening children gather and share their experiences of the day, sing songs and learn poems.

Through the balwaadis and the sandhya kendras, Janaki started talking to women about the concept of a mangal dal. The village women were receptive as their children had learnt many new things in the balwaadi. As more women joined the dal, the women opened a small account which was deposited in the bank and remained almost untouched for two years.

Being really patient and not giving up the vision of the mangal dal was the main quality of Janaki. Though at the initial stages, many women were opposed by their husbands to join the dal, later as more children came to the Sandhya Kendras, many women could be convinced of the idea of a women collective. The ways in which the dal could improve the condition of the village was the main reason why women agreed to be active. The meeting of the mahila mangal dal is held at the eighth day of every month and every woman contributes around Rs 12/- which goes into the joint account of the dal and any needy woman can borrow the money at any time.

Janaki says under her leadership, many oak trees have been planted and a nursery has been developed which was a very successful campaign by the village women as they went ahead despite all the opposition from men. The women are now united and have worked very hard to improve the environment of the village. It came out through the discussion with other women that it is often the mangal dal which decides who should stand for the panchayat elections.

Janaki had stood for the panchayat elections, but lost. The reason according to her was the money which was poured in which broke the votes amongst the different candidates. Alcoholism prevalent amongst the village men was cashed by the rich people. Janaki being poor had no resources to entice people.

Asked whether she faced any opposition at home because of her leadership engagements, she said she was opposed by her father in law a lot, because he was the incumbent pradhan, when she was heading the *mangal dal*. However she said he later supported her, when he saw that the development of the village was moving in a positive direction. She said her husband is an electrician, who does meter reading and makes arrangements for marriage events etc. However she says her husband has been supportive of her through out and even does the household work to lighten her burden. She pointed out very categorically, without her husband's support she wouldn't have been able to struggle this much, and mobilize the women on the issues concerning the village.

One of the chief reasons she gave for her interest in initiating development activities was the motivation provided by Mohan Chandra Kantpal, the secretary of the local NGO called SEED. He made her aware and awakened her interests to do something for her village. She says the development of the village is the most primary concern for her and she believes Mahila Mangal Dal is an important agency in the whole process,

When asked what is the criteria of electing pradhans she said it depends on the rapport that the Mangal Dal has with the nominated person. If the *dal* feels that the candidate is an appropriate one and in future will support the dal members in the development activities of the village all the mangal dal members elect her/him through consensus. Infact keeping the Mahila Mangal Dal of Rana village as a model, many women in other villages have started Mangal Dals on their own.

Janaki said, through her leadership, she often takes the issues regarding the village, to the panchayat and the difference that a collective voice can make is much effective from that of a voice of a single woman. Also through the collective women are much aware of the roles they have to play and most of them take out time more willingly from their daily life, to participate at the meetings. Their daily work is not an excuse for them. Also over a period of time men have started to accept *mangal dals* in the positive way and often listen to what the women have to say.

**Name: Pushpa Rawat**

**Age: 40yrs**

**Village: Saneri**

**District: Almora (Kumaon), Uttarakhand.**

**Designation: Pradhan(Gram:Saneri ) Adhyaksha (Head) *Mahila Mangal Dal***

**Education: Illiterate**

Saneri is a village which is 5-6 km on foot from the main road. It has been almost nine years since the dal started in Saneri and Pushpa Rawat has emerged as one of the unopposed leaders amongst the women. Pushpa is a widow, is a mother of four young boys and does not have any personal assets which she can count as her personal property. Pushpa led the *Mangal Dal* as the third president and said that she was very dissatisfied with the way the dal was working. She recalled that the dal members had to pay Rs 10/- every month, without any transparency on the part of the Adhyaksha to tell the members about the money collected. Pushpa for the third time, when told to deposit money declined. For the third time when the elections were held Pushpa was elected to head the mangal dal and since then has been holding the post.

Pushpa Rawat is a name which every villager respects, as she has fought at various levels on behalf of the village people. The main highlights of her struggle are getting the transformer back to the village, getting the drunkard school teacher back to the school to teach, and winning the panchayat elections in 2003, through a general seat.

The story of getting the transformer is the most cherished memory for Pushpa. She said she went to the local office after the men had been turned down by the local officials. Taking the members of the dal, she said at first the number went unnoticed by the officials, who did not *prefer* to give any attention to women. However the women waited patiently, till the JE arrived. It was only after a while that the women barged in the office and finally after 5-6 hour of discussion was the JE allowed to leave the office. Though the JE assured the women that things would work out within two days time, the women insisted that they need a written commitment before they go home. Towards the end of the day women had succeeded in taking a signed statement home from the engineer. For the first time, the village men were paid Rs 1800/- for their labour and the transformer was restored to the village.

The story of the village teacher is also somewhat similar to this. The local teacher never used to take classes and during the school hours was often drunk. Pushpa Rawat along with the members of the *Mangal Dal* went and locked the door of the class room and sat on the teachers' chair. She then called out the teachers name who was sleeping and commented loudly that *Gaon Ki Aurat Dekho Kursi Mein Beth Gayi Aur Master Jameen Mein So Raha Hai* (a village women has succeeded to sit on the school masters' chair and he is still sleeping). Hearing this the master was somewhat embarrassed and to this day he does not miss a class and has been taking classes regularly.

The panchayat election was another struggle for the village women. Due to some reasons Pushpa's name was signed off the nominee list. When Pushpa came to know about this, she said that none of the women will vote in the elections unless the names of all the nominees are there. When the plea was not heard, the women boycotted the elections; elections in Saneri village did not take place. Most of the men are working outside and therefore women have a say in the developments regarding the village. Looking at these developments the BDO came to the village and seeing the enthusiasm declared that elections will be held in 2003. Pushpa won the elections - not through a reserved seat but a general seat.

When asked, what is the source of her strength she said she always fights for what is right, and believes in the space for her own self. She said she believes in gender equality and even if her father in law will say something which is wrong, she will not reconcile to it. Pushpa believes in

an activist approach and said unless one fights for the rights one does not get it. She also asserted that she is the head of the mangal dal first and then the pradhyaan. In her tenure men have stopped taking alcohol during the day time and even if they do they do not create a mess or a public scene, illegal grazing of animals in the farms has also stopped. Also a road has been built by the *mangal dal*, through voluntary service (shram daan). The money from the block is however still pending. The reason for this is the 20% commission, which Pushpa refuses to give to the block. (In Uttaranchal, in most of the villages a 20-25% commission to the block is mandatory for the development work to continue). If the commission is not given, the funding stops. Pushpa says it is against her self respect and personal ethics to give commission. However she says if men and women of the village unite on this issue even the issue of the commission can be solved. When asked what about the other pradhyaans in the block, can a consensus about not giving the commission emerge, Pushpa said most of the pradhyaans do not bother about the commission, the development work of the village is more important to them as they have to secure the next tenure. She said that even if 25% pradhyaans agree on the issue, the commission can be stopped, though till now she has not found any success. She asserted only if men and women both unite for the development goals can they really change the system. She was positive that a change could be made.

Pushpa, a spontaneous decision-maker says the concern for development and the village women are her foremost priority. She welcomes obstacles as they show her new ways to approach issues; however she wants more people to come ahead and shoulder the responsibility and says she is tired of fighting battles and holding the responsibility of two positions simultaneously. Pushpa believes that *mangal dals* are necessary as through it there is some accountability, on the women leaders. Also they act as a launch pad for the village women to speak out their views. She believes that training and information are important ingredients because it makes the women aware of their own rights and more receptive to the things happening around them.

**Name: Hira Negi**

**Age: 45yrs**

**Village: Shiling**

**District: Almora (Kumaon), Uttaranchal.**

**Designation: Pradhan(Gram:Shiling )**

**Education: Class Twelve**

Hira Negi has two sons and two daughters. Her daughters have got married to well off families and her two sons are very well settled. Hira was initially associated with the *Mahila Mangal Dal*, but after she got elected she quit the position of the adhyaksha and concentrated on her work as the pradhan.

One thing which is special about Hira is that she was unopposed in the panchayati elections. Hira has a strong personality and was the first women to pass class twelve from her village. Hira's husband is a teacher and does not interfere generally with her work though he does not like the various risks that Hira takes. His main concern is a local man, who is graduate and an expert in legal matters. This man called Bacchi Singh has not only become a nuisance for Hira Negi but feels that as a pradhyaan she is a threat to his own selfish interests. He often strolls out in front of Hira's house at night after drinking, abusing her. During the day, in the meetings he opposes all the proposals that Hira puts forward. The medium through which he tries to mobilize the village women is through his wife, who is the up-pradhyaan. However as Hira was an adhyaksha of the mangal dal before, it is difficult for Bacchi Singh to divide the mangal dal over issues and turn them against Hira.



One of the issues in which Bacchi Singh opposed Hira Devi was the issue of taps. Bacchi Singh differed with Hira Devi on the location of the taps as Bacchi Singh wanted the taps in his area. To resolve this issue, Hira divided the number of taps in the respective areas and the issue was resolved. She said she had to buy some extra taps, so that they could be distributed equally in the respective areas.

Another issue which has been a problem for Hira is the phone connection. When Hira went to the block head office she found out that the phone connection had already been given to her village. On further enquiries she found that the ex pradhan of the village, who is a male has been using the phone as his personal asset. Not really wanting to have a confrontation with another man in the village (apart from Bacchi Singh, as she thought it would add as an ally to Bacchi), Hira decided to maintain silence on the issue. She believes that it will unnecessarily consume time as she has made prior efforts to talk to the ex pradhan, who says it is his personal connection. As the head office is 10-15 kms away, it is not possible for Hira to go back and forth from her village to the head office every now and then.

Hira lives in a joint family, which is very helpful as her work burden gets shared between different women of the family; she does not really face problems at home and her mother in law is quite supportive of her. Her husband was supportive earlier and used to help her with the work, but after a head injury, which he had some time ago, he does not take too much interest or bothers himself too much. Hira knows this and therefore avoids getting verbally involved with the men like Bacchi Singh. She says she is more concerned about development of the village, and therefore does not want to embroil with the likes of Bacchi Singh which can complicate matters. Her husband's health is of great concern to her and she says that if things go really out of hand, she does not mind stepping down. She is from a well-off family and says that she does not want anything for her own self interest as her family is quite well-off.

Shilling village consists of *thakurs*. As most of the residents are related to each other, there is solidarity amongst the group as they are all kin. A major factor for the unity amongst the women in Shiling is the absence of different castes, which prevents the dal from breaking into different groups.

Hira mobilized the women of her village to campaign for a road to the nearest point of the village. The slogan-*agar road nahin to vote nahin* (no votes without road) was raised. The women group succeeded in convincing the local MLA and the road was constructed, however 1 km of the road is still left and Hira is still waiting for its completion.

Hira now wants a Jan Milan Kendra in her village as there is no *panchayat ghar* at her village. For this she went to the block headquarters alone.

Through the help of the dal members she has also controlled the problem of alcohol in her village. The men in the village do not drink publicly during the day time. Some 5-6 years back, they were a nuisance to the whole village. Now if they drink, they confine themselves to their homes only. When asked why she was an unopposed candidate, Hira replied, elections break votes and usually divide the people, which can be cashed by some people; therefore the villagers decide to nominate an unopposed candidate.

Being a women pradhan and empowered in a way to identify her space, Hira has a different approach in identifying the needs of the village. As she knows that the women have elected her she has built tanks, dug trenches for collection of water and brought oak plants to the villages—some issues which really relate to the concerns of the women in the village.

**Name: Geeta Negi**  
**Age: 33 years**  
**Village: Shiling**  
**District: Almora (Kumaon), Uttarakhand.**  
**Designation: adhyaksha(mahila mangal dal)**  
**Education: Class Ten**

Geeta Negi studied in the town of Ranikhet before coming to Shiling. Before marriage she was unaware about the village chores. Infact cutting the grass and bringing fuelwood was very alien to her. Despite her opposition to the marriage, she got married and now has three girls and one boy. All of her kids go to school. Her husband does not do any work at present. This does not pose a problem as her family is quite well off. Her sister in law is the pradhan of the village.

Geeta was nominated for the post of the adhyaksha through consensus. Geeta has undertaken many campaigns in the village. During her tenure many tanks were built in the village. Nurseries were developed and tree plantations were done. A special characteristic of the mangal dals is the special concern for the development of the village.

The mahila mangal dal at Shiling is an inspiration to most of the women in the region as it was formed through a self initiative. The men of the village told the women about the *mangal dal* of the other villages and how through mangal dals the women were saving money and bringing various objects which belonged and were used by the whole village community.

The mangal dal in the Shiling village consists of enthusiastic young women. The meeting generally starts with a pahari song which elevates the spirit for the meeting which is held on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of every month. The dal has its own rules and regulations and every member has to abide by it. Some of the work that the mangal dal has done is as follows:

- ? The women group brought oak plants from the village called Jalili, which is 5-6km on foot from their village. Oak trees are important for water retention and the leaves are also eaten by the animals. Pines on the other hand are useless from the utilitarian point of view. The struggle for planting trees is important, given the topography of the hills, and a lot of courage and selfless feeling was essential to carry the plants from a distance of 4-5 kms. Also this was the own initiative of women and no one really guided them for it.
- ? Nurseries were developed by the village women, who thought this would improve the environment and reduce the distances that women need to walk. Another aspect which came out through the interviews was that of future generations. The women group believes that through developing nurseries they are investing for a safe future for their children and retaining the greenery of the village.
- ? Also in many places the ground has been dug so that water can percolate down. An effective way to watershed management, the women groups are aware and logistically choose the place where ground has to be dug. This they believe is important so that calves and buffalos do not fall into the trenches and hurt them selves. On the other hand the trenches that the government has been digging in the villages have been dug at random without any thought for consequences.

Geeta says she had wanted to study further, but due to some unfortunate circumstances she couldn't, after getting married her life just revolved around the daily chores she was suppose to do. She says as the president of the mangal dal she keeps her self busy and there is something else to look forward to apart from the mundane work which one does every day. Her daily activities provide this opportunity to fulfill the dreams which she had once dreamt for herself.

**Name: Shobha Negi**  
**Age: 35 years**  
**Village: Gughuti**  
**District: Almora (Kumaon), Uttarakhand.**  
**Designation: pradhan (Gram Gughuti)**  
**Education: Class five**

Shobha Negi is a woman that many refer to as Pati Pradhan. Shobha did not have much to say except for the fact that some of her husband's friends had come to her house and told her husband that he will win. After that Shobha stood for the elections and got elected through the reserved seat. Shobha does not understand much and the seal remains with her husband. She says her husband is the appropriate candidate because he is an M.Sc and there is no one in the village as educated as him. She said he understands and can tackle every thing.

Shobha is also a school teacher for the primary students in a government school. Most of the village women do not like this and feel someone else should have been given the opportunity to teach. As regarding her responsibilities she says that it is hard to build consensus because of the differences which the villagers have amongst them selves. Also she says that none of the women come for the meetings as they feel they are getting nothing out of it. The *mahila mangal dal* in the village is not as strong as no one wants to take responsibility of the work and there is no feeling of trust amongst the women.

When asked how she feels about being the village *pradhan*, she does not have much to tell and says all this was really new to her but her husband tells her everything as he is quite learned and understands all the complexities, which she is unable to understand. We cited the examples of other villages and reiterated how the *mangal dals* in the villages were playing a catalyzing role regarding the issues of development in the village. Shobha said she is waiting for the next elections for the *mangal dal* and the candidate she has in mind has a good rapport with her. She asserts if she is elected as the *adhyaksha* then she can do something for the village.

However she says, that slowly she understands politics and the intricacies associated with it. However she does not believe herself empowered enough to take independent decision and her world revolves very much around her husband.

When asked about the education status of the women, she says that the treasurer and the president (*adhyaksha*) are both educated and the main reason for the breaking of the *mangal dal* is the relationship between them, which is not very good. This equation between the different individuals is an important variable which determines the course of action which the individual takes. She says she has not studied much and was married at a young age. Only if the village people could be more cooperative, she as a *pradhan* could be of some help to her.

**Name: Durga Bisht**  
**Age: 40 years**  
**Village: Chaura**  
**District: Almora (Kumaon), Uttarakhand.**  
**Designation: Member, Block Development Committee**  
**Education: Class Eight**

Durga Bisht is an enthusiastic woman who is very politically aware. Durga has been brought up in Orissa and has studied till class eight, after which she was forced to quit studies because she had to look after her siblings. Durga has fought many battles at home and in public and infact is one of the pioneer women in the region in mobilizing the women into the groups.

When asked what were her inspiration and a motivating factor in all her struggles, she said she had always wanted to do something in life but her circumstances did not allow her. It was only after her marriage that things started opening for her. It started with a tailoring course, which started in her village, which was basically for women Below Poverty Line (BPL). As Durga did not fall into the category she persuaded her father in law, who was the pradhan of the village to push her case for an entry to the course. Initially her father in law dissuaded her by saying there is work to do at the home also. Durga assured him that she will finish the daily chores but insisted on doing the course.

Durga had heard about the concept of mangal dal from others. Usually during Holi, the women collect and go to each house and sing songs. Durga took this as an opportunity and later mobilized women into groups to form the mangal dal. The money collected during the holi was saved as the common property of the village women. When the men in the village came to know about the money collected they started showing interest in the mangal dal and told the women to give the money to them. When then women refused, claiming the money to be their property, many men including her father in law were opposed to the formation of the mangal dal. The other village men tried to incite Durga's father in law, who under the influence of alcohol dis-owned her, in front of the village members. However Durga did not relent and instead told her father in law *mein to apki hi bahun hoon aur mera ghar bhi wahi hain, isliye mein apko chor kar kahin nahin jaoongi.* (I am your daughter in law and the house where you stay is my house too and therefore she will not leave him and go anywhere). Later her father in law approached her and apologized for his attitude. Later the men started asking for the money which the women had collected and enquired as to what they would do with so much of money. The *mangal dal* however refused to give money to the men but appeased them by saying that they can buy something for the dal from the groups' money. The participation of men according to Durga was important, because without the consent of men many women in the village would have not participated actively in the meetings. The mangal dal under Durga's leadership, fought against liquor and as a BDC member she was also successful in ransacking many liquor shops in the village. Durga's husband does not drink and she believes if she can not control her own husband then what is the whole point of telling other women about the controlled liquor intake. Through her own initiative she helped opening up of a school in the village, which was being used as a animal shed. The building was renovated and now primary school children go to the building.

When asked why she did not stand up for the pradhan, Durga says, that she was duped by the ex gram pradhan, a man who said that there is no seat for the women. Durga on a mutual agreement withdrew her name, and later came to know that all this was false information. The second bitter experience for her was when she lost the block elections. This experience has helped her to understand how block politics work. The main reason to which she attributes her losing the elections was her refusal to sell her vote to the political party. She refused Rs 3 lakh, a huge amount in this area.

She has raised her voice against the commission paid in the kshetria panchayat. Also she keeps a check on the pradhan's accountability to the village. She says training programmes should be given to the women as it gives them a vision and clarity over the Panchayati Raj issues. Also she is emphatic about the fact that the training should not be restricted to the pradhans only and all the women holding any form of position should be trained and made aware of the issues in panchayati raj. Infact she had raised this issue in a conference organized by NCW.

Durga says it is through her own initiative that she has done so much. The main reason for all this has been her enthusiasm to do something in life. She is happy with the initiatives which the government has taken for the women and feels that if women are provided with information and the required training many will stand up as leaders.

**Name: Khurmuri devi**  
**Age 55 years**  
**Village: Malla Pindwali**  
**District: pindwali (garhwal), Uttaranchal.**  
**Designation: adhyaksha(president)**  
**Education: Uneducated**

Khurmuri Devi is a model for many village women across her region because of the fearless battle which she has fought in her village called Pindwali. Pindwali is amongst the most backward villages and only recently have people become receptive to what outsiders have to say. They have started dressing up more properly now. As the village is 10-12 km from the main road, not many people go there. A few years ago the people of the village refused to talk to the outsiders. However with the efforts of a local organization called Sadan , a mangal dal has been formed and has been active in the last four years.

Khurmuri Devi is an active member and has fought the battle against the liquor producers in her village. Her struggle against liquor started when there was a lot of discontent and chaos in her village. Men used to drink alcohol and create a scene in the public. It was then that the women in the village started thinking of this problem and Khurmuri took the lead responsibility. She mobilized the women of the village and went to the local producer to close down the *bhatti*. When the producers refused she threatened them to take the issue to the higher officials. Infact she went to Tehri Garhwal to raise the issue in front of the officials. Most of the women were initially not ready to speak and join the struggle when it came to activism. Only when these women were personally met and told about the pros and cons of the campaign, was Khurmuri successful in mobilizing women. With the help of the local NGO, she pushed off the local producers far to the forests, which helped to maintain peace in the village. It is not that the men today in the village have left drinking. However the liquor intake has become more controlled.

As the adhyaksha of the village she has again mobilized women to guard and nurture forests, which were depleting. As there was no fodder for the animals in the village, the women had to go far to the woods to fetch it. After the forests developed this problem has been solved. She says her husband has been very cooperative of all these endeavors and often feels proud of her. However the fact that her husband does not drink did not deter her from fighting against alcohol. She considers her husband's support to be immense as without her support she could not have gone out and fought the battle.

She says education does not really help the women in speaking out on issues. Though she is not literate she says she is far better than those women who being educated cannot speak.

On the involvement of women in the panchayats, she said that women do not go to attend the meetings as they do not have time. The women take self initiative if they have to do something in the village.

For Khurmuri, marriage helped her to speak out. She was not very vocal about her views initially, only when the Mangal Dal elected her as the adhyaksha, she thought that it was a moral responsibility to fight and speak on behalf of the various women. She is happy that her struggles were fruitful and often inspires women through her own examples.

### **Profiles from Churachandpur and Thoubal district, Manipur**

#### **About the state**

The north-eastern state of Manipur shares its borders with the states of Assam, Nagaland, Mizoram and an international border with Myanmar. There are 27 ethnic groups in the state with distinct languages. The largest section of the population are the Meities who reside in the valley

and historically have been the dominant group. The rest of the ethnic groups are dominant in the hills. While the Meities are Vaishnav Hindus, the rest of the ethnic groups belong to various denominations of Christianity. All ethnic groups in Manipur are patrilineal. Ethnic differences in the state are very pronounced.

### **Historical background.**

Manipur has witnessed major conflicts between various ethnic communities for the last few decades. Some ethnic communities also have wanted to separate from the Indian state. Due to various conflicts between ethnic groups and between certain ethnic groups and the Indian State, the Army was deployed in the 1950s and Manipur was placed under the Armed Forces Special Act.

Like many other parts of this region, retail trade is managed mostly by women. Historically women had protested against the State before and after Independence on various issues. The form of protest has been marked by procession of women walking with lighted torches and hence acquired the name of Meira Paibies (torch bearers).

### **Methodology and limitations**

Most of the interviews were conducted in office of the NGO that provided us with the logistical support. Given the difficult situation in Manipur, it was not possible to travel to the residences of the women to interview them. Most of the interviews were conducted in Churachandpur, the second largest city in Manipur, while two were conducted in Thoubal district, near Imphal.

### **Angom Nayani Leima – Secretary Ima Leimaren Apunba Lup, Churachandpur.**

**31<sup>st</sup> January 2005**

Ms. Angom Nayani Leima became member of Meira Paibis in 1993. She became a member of Leimaran Women's Welfare Society. The year 1996 was a great turning point in her life. From 1996 onwards she became very active in the in the Meira Paibis. Towards the end of 1996 there was tension between the Kukis and Zomis (Peitis) in Churachandpur that went on till 1998. Since Meities were not involved in conflict, Meities were involved in peace building. Even though she was just a member in the organisation, people asked her to take the lead in peace negotiations. Since 1998 she has been the secretary of the Ima Leimaren Apunba Lup. In 1996 all Meira Paibies (16) in Churachandpur district came together to form the ILAL.

Ms. Nayani was born and brought up in Churachandpur and knows people in both Zomi and Kuki communities. She knows more Zomi people as she lives in that neighbourhood. Even before peace negotiations, she was involved in Nisa Bandha and other social activities. Since the conflict has ended she does not negotiate between Zomi and Kuki. Now she negotiates between different armed groups and people; between armed groups; between security forces and people; and between security forces and armed groups. She negotiates for kidnapping and arrests. There were three cases in Churachandpur in January 2005 and also has negotiated in Imphal, Chandel, Moreh (Burma border) and Zeribam (Assam border). Sometimes for negotiations she has to be away for four months from the home. At present Nayani is the chief negotiator for the whole Churachandpur district among Meities.

Nayani got married in 1980 at the age of 18. Now she is 42 years old. Her husband is a driver in the army (SSB). She has three children, two sons (aged 22 and 20) and a daughter who is 10 years old. Her sons are studying for their Masters and Bachelors degree and the daughter is in class V.

When she has to go out for negotiations, all relatives help her with the household chores and looking after the children. She also looks after her husband's expired brother's children. As most of her natal family lives close-by they help her a lot. Her husband is in the army, he is out of the state most of the time. When asked specifically about her husband's reaction to her activities since he is in the army, she categorically said that he has supported her. He has never objected to her role as negotiator. Even before she got married, her husband knew that she was interested in social work. Since her parents-in-law and brother-in-law have passed away there was no one to oppose her activities. Generally the older generation is not supportive of such activities. But as they are not there, she couldn't say whether or not she would have been able to do the same if they were there. No one from her family before her has joined any woman's group. Before her marriage, she used to organise sports for children and social work in locality such as cleaning roads. In Meitie society, marriages may be arranged by the family or the boy and the girl may decide on their own. Nayani and her husband had decided to get married on their own.

People also come to her for family problems, for instance, one boy from Churachandpur married a girl from Imphal. They lived together for 12 days, and the husband has not returned for eight months. She has also intervened in cases of domestic violence such as when the brother-in-law (who is a drunkard) was trying to kill a woman and her children.

Ms. Nayani said that she has no intention of joining politics as she is only interested in social politics. She felt that if one got involved in politics, there cannot be a strong women's organisation. Some politicians have tried to use the Meira Paibis for their own benefits and tried to politicise the Meira Paibis.

### **J.L. Sawmi – president , Hmar women's Association, Churachandpur**

**31<sup>st</sup> January 2005**

The Hmar People's Convention (HPC) was held in Mizoram in 1986-87 with a demand for a separate district for Hmar people. In this regard a procession was carried out in the state of Mizoram for the demand. During this procession the Mizoram Armed Police beat the people. Some people were very seriously injured and some were killed. The injured were brought for treatment to Manipur where there were other Hmar people. The Mizoram Government announced that HPC was an underground outfit. The then chief minister of Mizoram ---Llthan Howla utilised some Hmar people as home-guards. The home-guards were sent to Manipur, to Churachandpur to arrest people who had fled there. The police in Churachandpur picked up many people, and took them to the police station. The men asked the women to help in release of the arrested. The women rang the 'alarm' bell. The women went to the police station with lighted torches and shouted slogans in the middle of the night. There were 1000 women and the police did not know how to deal with them. The women shouted at the police for being used by the Mizoram government. The police threatened us with arms but did not do anything. One-by-one the police released all the arrested people in front of us.

'I was surprised to see my teenaged son also among the arrested. The police had arrested him and other men from the church where they were practising singing. Whoever passed the road was arrested, even 70 year old men.'

The Hmar Women's Association (HWA) was set up in 1988 after this incident. Ms. Sawmi is a founding member of HWA. In 1988 she was elected to the post of Assistant Secretary. In 1990 she became the Vice-President and was the Vice-General Secretary from 1992-2000. She has been the President of the HWA since 2000.

The Hmar Revolutionary Force (HRF) was established to counter Mizoram Armed Police. Many conflicts between the police and the MRF took place in Manipur, even though the demand for the district has been in Mizoram. Conflicts now are minimal. The Hmar Inpui – Supreme House of Hmar – called all the factions to be together. HRF does not exist any more, only the Hmar People’s Convention exists. Now-a-days only boys from economically poor families join the militants.

There is a HWA in every locality in Churachandpur. The association works for the protection of women, both social and political and violence against women (women are looked down upon). The association wants women at the grassroots to know of their rights. Some Hmar sayings are derogatory towards women - ‘women are dirty linen’, ‘wisdom of women does not live beyond the river’, ‘one-off fencing and women can be changed into a new fencing whenever one likes it’. After the coming of Christianity in 1894, the looking down at women has reduced. The HWA goes to interior villages and gives awareness about rights in society and the church. They also give information to young women about health. Etiquettes and manners, eating and movement habits are also taught so that they may mix with other communities, especially in interior areas.

Ms. Sawmi feels that women can make the world beautiful or ugly. Membership of the Association is voluntary; they charge ten rupees per head per month. However since men are not encouraging, therefore membership is a problem in some localities. She also feels that if they get adequate funds there will be great progress as they will be able to give money to women (Rs. 50) to come for seminars, etc. She feels that if they help women from interior areas to form HWA, it will help in reducing insurgency. They are trying to set up a hostel for working women in this area and also teach weaving, knitting, other livelihood skills will help them earn a living. The HWA is not involved in negotiations unlike the Meities.

Ms. Sawmi said that personally she did not face resistance from the family. But other men say that ‘a woman who goes out, her husband is hen-pecked’. She is an Assistant –teacher – a government employee. She has three children – a daughter (32) who is married, a married son (27) and her youngest son is 24years old. When asked how she manages household chores, when she goes out, she told us that she makes all arrangements for the children. She tells her husband about her problems and takes his permission.

She feels that there is a big gap between Church based organisations and social organisations. Some think social organisations are anti-Christianity, even though the work is the same. Some of those who say social organisations are anti-Christianity are either Church leaders or politicians.

### **Zomi Mothers Association – Grace Zammi (Secretary) and Joycee (Vice – president), Churachandpur.**

**31<sup>st</sup> January 2005**

The Zomi Mothers Association (ZMA) was registered in 1991. ZMA became active after the ethnic clashes in Churachandpur in 1997. Zomi are the fourth largest group in Manipur after Meities, Nagas and Kukis. At first there were clashes between Kukis and Nagas in other parts of the state, and there after Kukis came as refugees to Churachandpur. Zomis thought that this was their area and Kukis felt that the Zomis were acting bossy. The clashes started initially among students, and later it turned between communities. During the clashes, the ZMA provided relief material, collected contributions, from Zomis and Karbis for the affected. The clashes took place in all villages in hill areas, houses were burnt down and many were killed. Many people came to Churachandpur town. The ZMA distributed relief materials. They conducted their own peace building activities which were separate from men’s efforts. The Zomi women prayed with Kuki



women. The ZMA also found places and homes for Zomi orphaned children in Coimbatore and Bangalore. After the clashes, membership of the ZMA has increased.

Joycee is a founder member of ZMA while Grace joined the ZMA joined after the clashes in 1997. The headquarters of ZMA are in Churachandpur, with branches in various villages, Delhi, Guwahati, Imphal, Bangalore and Shillong. Joycee is 41 years old and has four sons between the ages 14 and 2 years. She works in the horticultural department as receipt clerk. Her husband is understanding, however she can not go out everyday as she has office work. Grace is 34 years old. She has a one and half year old daughter and a five month old son. She works as a part-time teacher in the school run by her husband. She has done a course in nursery teachers training, and teaches primary and montessori children.

Even though the conflict is over, they help and give material to refugees. In 2003, there were clashes between Karbi and Hmar, or give in times of natural disasters items such as rice and blankets. The ZMA has also started SHGs and have 8 groups at the moment. Last year they also received some monetary help from the Member of Parliament local fund, with which they built a work shed., and looms were installed. However they have not been able to get enough funds to start work. The ZMA has intervened in other matters also. In 1998 a drunkard and 'goonda' in Sinzawal sold his youngest daughter 45 years old to a family who did not have a child. The ZMA found the child and handed her back to her mother.

### **Ms. Tingneikim – Secretary, Kuki Women's Union, Churachandpur.**

**2<sup>nd</sup> February 2005**

Then Kuki Women's Union (KWU) was formed in 1993 as a result of the ethnic clashes between Nagas and Kukis. The women did not know what to do in the situation. SO they came together to pray in churches. KWU was first formed in Senapati district. The KWU came to Churachandpur in the same year and set up a branch. Ms. Tingneikim is a founding member of KWU-Churachandpur district. She was not interested in as a student but became active due to dire circumstances.

In 1997 June 25<sup>th</sup>, clashes between the Kukis and the Peitis (Zomis) started.. Women did not know what to do. Women first started to pray. They contacted Kuki-Inpi leaders (Inpi are traditional leaders). Kuki women started with relief works. They donated material for the refugees. Gave medical assistance to the injured. 'That is all we can do, women can't do anything during firing.' She told us that her marital family does not mind her involvement. Her natal family also had carried out relief work, in fact everyone was involved. She personally collected clothes, utensils, food items etc. Refugees had come from the hills into Churachandpur town. Kukis from other districts had also sent materials to Churachandpur. There is a KWU branch in every district of Manipur. KWU does not have any activities after the ethnic clashes in various parts of the state. Only in Churachandpur district the KWU meets once in a month but is defunct in other districts.

If in a village, security forces picked up young boys or men, then women go to the police station to lobby for their release. However Ms. Tingneikin does not personally go to the police station but other women go. KWU associated strongly with the Church. Many women church leaders are in the KWU. Due to ethnic clashes many children were orphaned. After the clashes in 1998, they started an orphanage with 11 children. Now there are 47 children. They collect contributions from local women. Women offer fasting prayer and collect the food they would have eaten and donate this. Every month in Nov-Dec they go to different places to collect rice for the orphanage. Sometimes the church also gives money. The orphanage is inter-denominational. Both girls and

boys between the ages 5-15 years are living there. There are more boys than girls as girls are more helpful in the house so girls are taken by families.

### **Interview with Ms. Hanjabam Radhe Sarma and Ms. Laisram Shanti, Thoubal**

**1<sup>st</sup> February 2005.**

#### **Ms. Hanjabam Radhe Sarma**

Ms.H Radhe Sarma initiated the Meira Paibis in her locality 15 years. She was a costume designer for Raslila dance in Nigthoukhong (Bishnupur district). She was travelling with costumes to Nigthoukhong and there was a bandh. The women (Meira Paibis protesting for Nisa Bandh) had caused the bandh. They let her pass as she was taking the dresses for worship. Radhe also realised that she should take a letter from the secretary saying that they should let her pass.(The women wanted to destroy the vehicle).

Radhe was very impressed with the Meira Paibies. It was the strongest group that she had encountered. She went around Thoubal for six months organising women and formed the Meira Paibis in Thoubal. She felt the need of women to come together from the nearby villages. She spent one day in every village. She organised to have representatives at one place. She bore the expenses of their travel. She explained the necessity of such a group to women. She invited only women but explained the purpose to men in the villages. She feels that men should be included. She had heard of the Meira Paibis before the bandh and knew that they were involved with Nisa Bandh. (Radhe was known in the villages as she used to travel with costumes for the Raslila.)

When she started the Meira Paibis the liquor problem was in her village also. Her own son was drinking heavily. One day she saw her (elder) son drinking. She took him to the club and had him thrashed and set an example. She warned the liquor sellers to stop selling. In Wangjing area she is the secretary of Ke Wangjing Apunba Lup. There are 12 members in Wangjing area.

When asked how the Meira Paibis moved from Nisa Bandh to protest against the Armed Forces Special Powers Act; Ms. Radhe Sarma explained that in Manipur wives do not do anything without the consent of the husband. In the localities, the Security Forces entered the houses, picking up youth as militants. Then Meira Paibis said that if the security forces wanted to come to arrest, they would have to take permission from the Meira Paibis. But security forces bypassed the Meira Paibis and would pickup men. If men protested, they were beaten up. Security forces beat up men but not the women. Therefore the Meira Paibis started protesting against Armed Forces Special Act.

Women cannot see their men being beaten up. The Meira Paibis is doing this to protect the men. They now sit with torches in the community shed guarding the locality if such a situation is likely to arise.

Ms. Radhe Sarma is a 70 years old brahmin lady and has five sons and two daughters. Her husband died 20 years ago, before she joined the Meira Paibis. She also used to run a small hotel. She wanted to contest for Town Commissioner and the Meira Paibis also supported her. But she is illiterate. She also felt that then she would have to join a major political party. She also feels that her arena will be limited in politics. She wants to keep doing different types of activities. But now she is grooming other women as leaders. She has asked others to become the Secretary as she has many responsibilities – costumes, hotel and vending. She is also a negotiator between the security forces, armed groups and people.

When asked how she managed to move from place to place for Raslila costumes, she told us that her relatives would look after the children. She often used to take her children to other villages with her. If she had to stay the night she would stay with the customers.

When asked about the Manorama case, Ms. Radhe was of the view that Manorama had negative and positive qualities. She had been found guilty. 'But the question is why did they gang rape her and kill her? Why did they take her to the jungle and rape her? The security forces are here to protect common people but they are torturing women. The women who protested nude after Manorama's death said – 'you are 10,000, we will give you 10,000 women, come rape us'. Security personnel rape boys also.' She also expressed her anger about the fact that the Assam Rifles have occupied Kangla which is a sacred place for the Meities.

### **Ms. Laisram Shanti**

Ms. Laisram Shanti is 38 years old, and has two sons and one daughter. She got married at the age of 20. She studied up till class X. No one from her natal family was a member of the Meira Paibis. She joined the Meira Paibis ten years ago. Her eldest child is 17 years old. She was always interested in social work. She was active in social activities in high school – she was the general secretary in school. The Meira Paibis wanted her to join them and she too was interested but her husband restricted her. Then the women negotiated with her husband. Due to the social structure, her husband was not keen on her going out and speaking in public.

She told us that because of the present situation, the security forces can pick up any boy and she also has sons. She feels that she has to protect all the boys. If she is just a woman she has no voice, but with Meira Paibis she has a voice. Her life has changed since she joined Meira Paibis. Earlier her husband restricted her but now she can speak boldly now. She can speak in a gathering.

Ms. Shanti told us that they get involved in quarrels between husband and wife. If husband brings a second wife, and first wife does not want to live with her husband, they make sure that the first wife and children get some maintenance. Sometimes they make the second wife go away. If a boy elopes and later leaves the girl, then also they intervene and counsel. Apart from this they also provide aid during famine, times of distress. They collect material from people and send it to the affected people. She was of the opinion that one cannot completely ban liquor, but compared to the situation ten years ago, they drink and brew liquor without creating a nuisance.

Ms Shanti hopes she will contest for panchayat elections. She feels that if women contest women vote for the woman. She also acts as a negotiator between armed groups, the security forces and people. Referring to the Manorama case, she told us that she was shocked to see the dead body in the jungle.

### **Profiles from Shillong and Nartiang, Meghalaya**

#### **About the state**

The state of Meghalaya was carved out of Assam on 21<sup>st</sup> January 1972. The main tribes in Meghalaya are Garo, Khasi and Jantia(Pnar). All these tribes are matrilineal with the youngest daughter being the custodian of the property. Control however is in the hands of the males. Ethnic differences are strong in Meghalaya.

#### **Historical background**

The decade of the nineties was marked by strong inter ethnic conflicts in Shillong between those who were considered insiders and outsiders who had settled from other parts of the country. There is a significant population of Bengalis, Nepalis, Assamese and people from other states in Shillong. In Shillong, where most of the interviews were conducted, residence is on the basis of

ethnic locality, although a few mixed neighbourhoods do exist. For the past few years, the situation in the state has been peaceful.

In Shillong each neighbourhood has a women's group. In Khasi language they are known as Synjuk Kanthai (women's group). The synjuk kanthai has voluntary membership, with an nominal membership fee. The synjuk kanthai in the economically better areas are more active than those in poorer localities. Other ethnic groups also have their own women's associations (mahila mandals). Apart from the Synjuk kanthais, women's groups associated with churches of different denominations are also active in the state.

### **Methodology and limitations**

Interviews were conducted with well known women leaders in Shillong and a recently established Synjuk Kanthai in Nartiang, about 90 kms from Shillong. The interviews were conducted at the residences of the women leaders. Except for Nartiang, most of the women leaders met are very well known in the state, are very well educated and belong to the upper strata of society.

### **Kong Patricia Mukhim**

**28<sup>th</sup> January 2005**

Kong Patricia Mukhim has been at the forefront of women's movement since many years and has also been awarded with the Padmashree. She is well known columnist and activist regarding women's issues.

Kong Patricia had always felt the need to mobilise women. She had been active in state politics for a considerable number of years. She had been in the Congress party from 1978-94 and was also a member of the Disciplinary Action Committee in the Parliamentary Committee. However she left the party as her personal views did not match those of the party. She felt that the party was not giving enough attention to issues such as corruption.

Kong Patricia Mukhim felt that the notion of the dominant women among Khasis is not true. Only the youngest daughter gets the property. Only if the parents are rich can they distribute property to other daughters. Along with the property the youngest daughter also has to undertake the responsibility of looking after the parents and other old or ailing uncles and aunts. She also has to take care of all rituals and ceremonies. There is not much scope for social mobility for her.

Traditionally women have not been part of the *dorbars*. The term 'Rangbah Shnong' which means *headman* connotes that there is no place for woman there. There are other sayings in Khasi which denigrate women's right to participate in the public domain – 'When a hen crows, it is the end of the world' (Women should not speak out, enter politics).

Women's role in political leadership is not visible, as women have been left out. Political parties have women's wings but they have been used by the parties. Women are used at polling stations. Even if women are in the fray, women do not vote for women en-block. There has been no exemplary women legislators in Meghalaya. Women always have had to support their legislator husbands. But this does not work the other way round. Most women legislators have been widows of male legislators.

Women have taken up social issues such as combating alcoholism and raising awareness against the sale of alcohol. Recently women's groups had come together to protest when the State Commission for Women was formed without consulting women's groups. Quinne Ranjah set up the Synjuk Kynthai over 50 years ago. The Synjuk Kynthai conducted health checkups and crèches (1960's).

Ms. Patricia Mukhim felt that women have not been able to make any policy changes. This is because women's groups have been apolitical. She was of the view that to achieve this women will have to negotiate with governments and with political parties, but women's groups have avoided doing this.

Ms. Mukhim also pointed out the big gap between urban and rural areas in terms of emerging women's leadership. Even in urban areas, only the forward looking and the educated are coming forward. There is no women's leadership in rural areas. In a few urban areas women are coming in the *dorbar*. In *dorbars* in rural areas, women have a secondary role. Their role is confined to cooking, cleaning, etc. but they do not set the agenda.

She feels that women are now realising the need to federate. The need to be associated with an organisation is being felt for issues like rape, domestic violence. Doesn't think women's leadership emerges only in women's groups, as only a few speak. Others remain as they are, they get comfortable. Women need to speak-up. There is very little opportunity for capacity building. Leadership is not natural, it has to be nurtured but we have not tried to build ourselves into a force to be reckoned with.

### **Wangbiang Phalyngki (secretary) and Synshar Phalyngki (treasurer) –Nartiang**

**28 January 2005**

Wangbiang Phalyngki and Synshar Phalyngki both belong to the Pnar (Jantia) community which is the main community in that area. There are about 500-600 families in Nartiang, each family has 10-15, 20 members. Agriculture is the mainstay of the economy. The main crops are paddy, ginger, and vegetables. Half of the families in Nartiang are landless.

Mr. Moina Sing Phyllut (headman of the village) had invited Roshmi Goswami from NEN and she gave a talk in the village. Roshmi Goswami gave training on health care, religion and politics. When Roshmi Goswami had come, they had liked the discussion on health the most. After this experience, the other women of the village decided to set up the organisation. They decided to set up the *seng* as they felt that they had to bring about change for the coming generation, especially in the areas of health and education.

The group came about as women wanted to be empowered. The group started with 24 members and now there are 40 members. They have a membership fee of Rs. 5 per month. The members are in the age group 16-50. Very few of the women are illiterate. The *seng* was formed on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1997.

They wanted to make their community progressive. People were lacking education, health care and 'behaviour'. Apart from this people also faced lack of capital. Lack of employment opportunities is leading cause of poverty. Most people are working in agriculture but there is no employment. They mentioned that more and more people are becoming landless. Due to poverty people are not going to school. They felt that poverty is the biggest problem.

The other problem in the community is alcoholism. Now we complain to the headman if someone is behaving badly. Even though Pnar are matrilineal, there have been incidents where the boy has taken over the property. Divorce has also increased.

A meeting is held on the second of every month. Most of the activities taken up by the Seng have been regarding health. The Seng does theatre on issues such as drunkenness and divorce. Very often after having a child, the man abandons his wife and marries another women. The theatre was done in the community and was seen by both men and women. The women's group along with headman have invited Member of District Council, doctors, Member of Legislature, engineers, etc, to give talk on issues such as cleanliness, health etc.

If the matter is domestic then women take leadership but if the matter is public, the men take the lead. A woman had contested for the district council but did not succeed.

The most crucial issue the women felt were poverty for the women and education. The group had also started a self help group (SHG) in 2004. The scheme has been forwarded from the block office.

The group wanted to know how to get help for their organisation. If they can get some funds, they would like to have a building and start a school for the drop-outs. They also want to start poultry farming. The members of the group went several times to the BDO for a building grant but of no avail. Now they are planning to go to the MLA.

## **28<sup>th</sup> January 2005**

### **Angela Rangad**

There is a women's group in every locality. These groups are unstructured. They have a membership fee. Many also run locality crèches and vocational training. These groups are able to mobilise women. All localities are based on ethnic lines. There have been major riots also in the 1990s. They targeted Nepali population. There is a basic insider-outsider divide in Shillong.

Two issues on which women have mobilised – 1) Right to Information – Maitshaphrang Movement 2) State Commission for Women was formed without consulting the women's groups. Women demanded a transparent and participatory State Commission for Women. Women have mobilised over issues of violence and rape.

There also have been spiralling effects, such as the Nepali women took up a case where a man had raped and killed his girlfriend. Women had taken up the issue. After that other women's groups had felt that if Nepali women can do it so can we. However some issues such as dowry among Nepali women may not come up.

## **29<sup>th</sup> January 2005**

### **Kong Margaret Mawlong**

Kong Margaret Mawlong was the first woman to join the Assam Civil Service and topped the list. Later was nominated to the Indian Administrative Service. She retired in 1996. When she had joined the Civil Service, Meghalaya was part of Assam. She began her career as a teacher at St. Mary's School in Shillong, where she herself had studied as a student. Her first child was born when she was 24 years old. She has 6 children – 4 girls and 2 boys. But as her children were young she found it difficult to continue with the job. Later she started working in the Accountant General's office. She said that she loves working with numbers. She recalled that there were many Bengalis in the office and they encouraged her to take the civil services exam. While filling the form, she first filled for a clerk's post and filled the officer's post in civil service as the third choice. But the person who was receiving the forms returned the form and asked her to fill for officer's post in the civil services as her first choice.

When the Bangladesh war broke out in 1971, she was the Extra Assistant Commissioner and had co-ordinated the relief work. At that time thousands of refugees were pouring into India. They had to build shelters over-night. It was a very good experience for her.

From 1972-74, after the formation of Meghalaya, she was the Special Officer for Women and Children's Programme and State Nutrition Officer. She worked on maternal and child health and

nutrition, and also with gram sevikas. At that time there were 24 development blocks in the state, now there are about 36.

At that time the state was also promoting family planning. She recalled that people used to say it is God's will. Spacing was acceptable but not stopping children. Women were working very hard, had many children and miscarriages were many. Later she also went to Bangkok (United Nations) for training on Mother and Child issues. Later she was also offered the post of a consultant in Bangkok but she declined and came back. Mrs. Mawlong also started consumer protection in the state.

Even though women inherit property, uncles and brothers manage property. Only the youngest daughter inherits. Women in Meghalaya have too many responsibilities – they look after the land, work on the land and have to bring up children. The youngest daughter has to look after anyone – aunts, uncles –who don't have families and are ailing.

She recalled that earlier when women started working in the offices, they were considered tainted. Only teaching was acceptable. Earlier women would not go out of the house/village unless there was a marriage or death. Even when Babu Jeeban Roy (Khasi) the great reformer in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, who started the 1<sup>st</sup> press in Shillong 'Ri-Khasi Press', sent his daughter to work and manage the press, he was criticised for doing this. G.G. Swells – the first speaker in parliament from Meghalaya was also among those who criticised him.

When asked whether there were gender differences in nutrition or literacy, she pointed out that there are no gender differences in nutrition or literacy. But the mother eats last, so women suffer especially if the family is poor. The children eat first, then the husband and the woman eats last.

The gender difference is seen in politics. She remarked that it is a dirty and difficult game. She had contested as a United Democratic party candidate in 1998. While she did not win the seat, she was second. She lost only by 300-400 votes. She feels that men are not happy about women joining politics. Even now authority remains completely with men.

Every village has a Dorbar that is headed by a man. All the other executives in the dorbar are also men. Some Dorbars in urban areas have allowed women to join, but it is not so in villages, except when they want women to take up the issues. Women do not go out in public and talk. Earlier women were not given a chance and also had restricted ability. Men still think that women should keep away. If women want something, they whisper to men to speak in the Dorbar. Otherwise women's role is restricted to bringing water, ration and fuel.

Most of the Seng Kanthais are involved in matters of education, jobs-skill training, they get schemes (developmental), give training on health, give training in villages. They also organise health and relief works. Most are also involved in stopping selling of liquor and providing child care. There are Seng Kynthai in the church too, which teach about how to bring up children.

Seng Kynthais have mutual benefit societies and thrift societies. Domestic violence and liquor are a big problem. There is a very high percentage of broken homes. There are six women in Shillong jail for murdering their drunken husbands.

Synjuk ki Seng Kyanthai – had been lobbying for a State Commission for Women for many years. When NCW from Delhi was coming, the govt suddenly appointed a vice-president without consulting her, and a president who had nothing to do with women's issues. These were political appointments. There are no powers for Women in the Commission. At present the government has said that 70% of what women have demanded want will be included.

(When the Government started the function of setting up the State Commission for Women, the women silently got up with placards that said that they were not consulted in the formation of this commission and quietly walked out of the proceedings.) The Apex body of all the Seng Kynthais

is the Ke Lympongh Ki Seng Kynthai. Women's leadership is visible in selected urban areas around district head quarters. In rural areas things are changing because of TV and transport. There are men's associations and youth associations also that call women to cook but now women protest.

When the State Women's Commission was set up there was a lot of resistance from men. Men said that women get property, then why do they want a commission? But there is a lot of landlessness, and only the rich have property. Earlier the land was owned by the community. Now the Lyndohs of different clans have control over community land. Slowly it has become private property. Coal and limestone quarrying, and timber have made some people very rich.

There has also been an increase in liquor consumption, especially Indian Made Foreign Liquor is used more than local liquor.

**29<sup>th</sup> January 2005**

**Ampreen Lyndoh**

Ms. Ampreen Lyndoh is the daughter of a very well known MLA, who died recently. (When the seat fell vacant, it was the son rather than Ms. Lyndoh who was offered the father's seat even though, we were told by others, she was keen to contest.)

According to Ms. Lyndoh, as a result of matrilineity, women are given a status, but it is clichéd. In terms of inheritance, women are protected. But now, she felt the system is obsolete. She was of the view that men feel that they have the licence not to take responsibility. Women have to be economically empowered. They have to bear the financial burden of bringing up the children. In lower strata, especially – men have many wives. Women get used to discordant homes. Seven out of ten are broken homes.

Politically women are not empowered. But they are used for political purposes. All patrons and martyrs among Khasis are men. 'We do not have a 'Rani of Jhansi''. She was of the opinion that there is also a strong women against women campaign. Khasi Seng Kyanthai is not strong like the Garos or Meities of Manipur. In Meghalaya, they recruited women police for the first time and only two women were selected and both are Garos. There is a lack of police women and very few women lawyers.

The threats of survival for women are increasing. For instance if the man does not sign the paper, the woman cannot go for abortion. Substance abuse is increasing. It is increasing among girls also. Women do not have many options – if a women throws her husband out, she is treated badly by society. Domestic violence is a big issue. Substance abuse and marital discord are the main reasons for this. Women have come together on issues of rape, child molestation etc. In one instance, a child was molested and then killed – the women came together to protest.

Ms. Lyndoh was of the view that protests by women's groups have been sporadic over various issues without any consistency. In Meghalaya, the 33% reservation for women bill was floored in 2003-04 but has not been passed. The Seng Kynthais are sustained on perks. Members of the Seng Kynthais are appointed on various boards. But only the elite Seng Kynthais are functioning. They take and implement schemes for poorer localities. She recounted an incident when the Seng Kynthais could not tell TV networks about violating the privacy of the victim in a rape case. On this issue there was no protest by Seng Kynthais.



**29<sup>th</sup> January 2005**

**Hasina Karbhih**

Ms Hasina Karbhih runs a very well known NGO –Impulse- in Shillong. She studied management. As a student she was involved in event management. The money generated from these events went in establishing other NGOs. With her experience in collecting funds for NGOs, she decided to start working on her own, and decided to set up her own NGO. Impulse started in 1993 and was registered in 1996. The first work that they did was to support women and children, especially economically deprived. The NGO adopted Syntein village (East Khasi district) which is a traditional craftsmen's village. They did a 'needs assessment'. The NGO first developed a market strategy and then skill building of craftsmen. They started exporting in small quantities. The profit was used for social causes. She was helped by her brother who himself is an exporter in this regard.

The ban by Supreme Court on forest produce led to large migration to urban centres and child labour. Many children are disappearing, there is child trafficking. HIV/AIDS is also a issue. They conducted programmes on HIV/AIDS with students of Don Bosco School using innovative concepts rather than training. They were also awarded for the innovative concepts. They used T-shirt campaign, film screening, bag campaign, etc.

She feels that ethnic differences over-ride all other problems in Meghalaya. Even if a women is sent to a shelter, first they ask, is she Khasi? Domestic violence and alcoholism have been taken up as campaign issues but it is a one time issue and not sustained. In Meghalaya, living together denotes marriage. Child marriage is prevalent. There is increase in prostitution, especially highway prostitution. However, it is not seen as prostitution by the people.

Impulse NGO is for children but government is sending destitute women to our shelter home also. However they do not have the staff trained to deal with women. The issues of children and women are different.

The community based organisations – Seng Kynthais – conduct awareness programmes, rights of women, registrations – births, substance abuse. Every locality has a Seng Kyanthai, where membership and work is voluntary. Some might get funds for certain programmes.

However Seng Kynthais do not offer any support services. Among Nepalese and Assamese – there are mahila mandals.

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