

“Achieving Convergence for Empowerment of Women”

National Mission for Empowerment of Women

Regional Conference of the North East Region

Venue: Pinewood Hotel Shillong

7-8 February 2012

CONFERENCE REPORT



Introduction

Hum Sunenge Naari ki Baat

The first regional conference of the National Mission for Empowerment of Women was held for the North East Region on 7-8 February, 2012 at Shillong. The states included in the regional consultation were Meghalaya, Assam, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh. The conference was co-hosted by Meghalaya's Social Welfare Department of the Host State, along with the NMEW. **148 participants** registered for the Conference Consisting of Government of India Officials of the National Mission for Empowerment of Women, State Government Officials, Chairpersons, Vice Chair persons and members of State women Commission of all North Easter State (Except Tripura), eminent women activists, member of Civil Society & NGO's. The overall objective of the conference was to achieve greater convergence aimed at empowerment of women.

The Conference was organized around three main thematic areas of interest:

1. Looking Back – Sharing of Experience on Achievements, Issues and Challenges.
2. Looking Beyond – Thematic approach: Presentations & Plenary Discussions and Convergence Efforts.
3. Looking Forward – Wrap Up and Cull out Important Recommendations for follow up.

Each theme was introduced by a series of presentations, which were followed by plenary discussion, comments and views from participants. There were open house discussions towards the end of the Conference where participants were asked about their feedback regarding the sessions, organization of the conference and way forward.

DAY 1

Inaugural Session

The inaugural session started with the presentation of bouquets by the representatives of the Department of Social Welfare to the Dignitaries and was anchored by Ibansara Nengnong. This was followed by the delivery of the welcome address by Shri. N.S Samant, I.A.S (Principal Secretary to the Government of Meghalaya, Social Welfare Department).

Shri. N.S. Samant in his welcome address stressed on the theme “Achieving convergence for Empowerment of Women” while laying the context, in this first regional conference of the North East, held in Meghalaya. He warmly welcomed J.A. Lyngdoh, State Minister of Social Welfare for his support and appreciative work especially in the sphere of empowerment and development of women. After which he welcomed Shri. Nilanjan Sanyal, I.A.S, Additional Secretary and the Mission Director, National Mission for Empowerment of Women, Ministry of Women and Child Development, and thanked him for having felt the need of this regional conference and his participation in this process of strategizing for meaningful sectoral convergence for the overall development and empowerment of women. He informed that the National Mission for the Empowerment of Women was launched on the 8th March 2010. He also welcomed Smt. Rashmi Singh, Executive Director, National Mission for Empowerment of Women (Mission), Ministry of Women and Child Development and thank her for constant encouragement and contribution in the sphere of women’s empowerment. Later he announced that besides the States Resource Center for Women, the proposal for the District Resource Centers for Women & Village Centers for Women will be sent to the Mission by

the Government of Meghalaya very shortly. He welcomed the Chairpersons, Vice Chairperson and members of Women State Commission of the North Eastern States and particularly Smt. Roshan Warjri, Chairperson Meghalaya State Women's Commission, Ex-MLA. He also stressed that there is a need to achieve the goal of convergence by involving all stakeholders. He welcomed the Government States representatives from all the North Eastern States, the Non government Organization, Civil Society, Organizations, and the media representatives. He ended his welcome address with the hope that this two day conference would culminate in a concrete plan of action and policy guidelines for the whole of the North East.

This was followed by the lighting of the lamp, where after, Shri. Nilanjan Sanyal, I.A.S, (Additional Secretary and Mission Director, National Mission for Empowerment of Women, Ministry of Women and Child Development), gave his introductory address and charted a rationale on the need for holding such a conference and selection of the North East for the first Regional conference of the Mission. He felt that the North East region is an area where at times development issues are often overlooked. He congratulated the organizers for their excellent team work and ensuring almost hundred percent participation from the North East Region despite various difficulties in communication particularly transportation. The mission has taken serious steps in addressing the need to work consistently thus making 'convergence' a success. The holistic empowerment of women cannot be brought about if the departments work in isolation, on the other hand convergence would mean hand in hand corporation and work between the State Governments, Central Governments, Civil society and Village level institutions.

This was followed by the address from Smt. Rashmi Singh, Executive Director, National Mission for Empowerment of Women, on the mission, its mandate and activities to better inform the audience and provide a focal point for the conference deliberations. Explaining the logo of the mission she said that it represents 'hope' and 'aspirations' of millions of people around the country who are standing in the threshold of empowerment. She mentioned the sense of confusion and non clarity regarding many schemes and their accessibility and the question of unheard women's voices. She stressed the need for collective action (from the State-Central-Civil Society) to ensure a life of 'dignity' and empowerment for women. The meaning of empowerment should encompass not only economic empowerment but also address social and political empowerment which would promote equality, gender justice and

representation of women. By achieving this, along with a violence free environment for women empowerment would have a holistic understanding.

Shri. J.A Lyngdoh, the Minister of Meghalaya, Social Welfare Department, who was the Chief Guest at the function, foresaw a paradigm shift not only in Meghalaya but the region and the country as a whole. Reflecting back to the year 2001, which was observed as the year for empowerment of women, a lot had perceived to have happened in the field of women's empowerment barring the increase in their economic participation. The role of women he felt should not be undermined as they contribute both in remunerative and non-remunerative activities. He stressed the need for effective convergence amongst the various stakeholders at all levels starting from the grass root level way up to the state and central level.

To conclude the inaugural session, the vote of thanks was proposed by the Ms Loma Nora Jyrwa, Additional Director, Social Welfare, Government of Meghalaya.

Plenary Session

It was envisaged that the conference would provide a platform for every State of the region to put forward its perspective on variety of issues concerning women. In order to achieve this, the first topical session after the inaugural session was on **“Empowerment of Women: Achievement, Issues, Challenges and Convergence: Experience from States”** during which Secretaries (WCD) of each State government were invited to make a presentation on their respective State's perspective and status. Representatives of Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Sikkim, Nagaland and Mizoram made presentations during the session. The representatives from Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh were unable to attend due to unforeseen circumstances. Representatives of the various State Women's Commissions of the region were also present and spoke on their experiences, except for the State Women's Commission of Tripura which was unrepresented.

Representing the State of Assam, Mr. Syed Esme Alam, Deputy Director of Social and Welfare, addressed the issues on health like MMR, IMR, anemia Child Sex Ration, Neo Natal deaths, crime against women including trafficking (which were still alarming in the state), witch – hunting etc. The recent achievement of the state of Assam was the introduction of the Scheme to empower Single Married Women and the launching of the *Poorna Shakti*, on the 23rd December 2011. Reservations of 30 percent seats for women, reduction in stamp

duties for registration of land in women's name, were some efforts around empowerment of women in the state.

Representing the state of Sikkim, Ms. K K Subba, Joint Director Women & Child Development Social Justice Empowerment & Welfare Department, Govt. of Sikkim, Gangtok, presented a positive picture of women empowerment in the state. There was marked improvement in literacy rates; existence of well planned health system and reservation of fifty percent of seats in Panchayats, reservation of thirty percent seats in government jobs; provisions for maternity leave, free education, social security, and non existence of female infanticide cases. Child marriage however is a social evil in the state.

Mr. Kevito Tshohe, Director of Social Welfare, Government of Nagaland, felt that the issue on the empowerment of women was not perceived as a pressing issue in the state. The number of women outnumbered that of men in Government and similarly girls outnumber boys in school. The SHGs formed in Nagaland were mostly engaged in weaving modern designs. Along with this, the struggle for women's inheritance rights has been a part of the civil rights movement in the state. The socio-economic indicators for women's empowerment might be positive but their status and position in society is deteriorating given the increase in the crimes against women. With reference to the increase in the number of cases of broken family and marital discord, he suggested setting up of marriage counseling centers.

The representative from Arunachal Pradesh, Ms. Gumri Ringi, Chairperson Arunachal Pradesh, addressed the issue of non implementation of the laws and sensitization about legal rights. The issues of polygamy and child marriages continue to stand in the way of women empowerment. The North East Network, an NGO working in the North East, was engaged in creating awareness on Domestic Violence in the state. It was felt that more genuine non-government organizations should be identified to take the agenda of women's empowerment forward.

Representative from Manipur, G. Satyabati Dev, Director Social Welfare, Manipur, listed some of the achievements of the state on empowerment of women: setting up of a women run market; presence of a strong women empowered group called the "Mairapaibi"; introduction of two new schemes by the State Government – the Financial Assistance to poor and needy widows, and the grant in aid to women. It was felt that the problem of terrorism and its

effects on women continued to be a great challenge for women's empowerment in the state. She concluded by reiterating that empowerment for women should be a right in itself and its applicability should not be vested outside the individual.

The representatives from the state of Mizoram Ms. Remliani Chaungthu, Deputy Director of Social Welfare Department, Mizoram and Ms. Lalnipuii, Chairperson, Women Commission, Mizoram, spoke about women's economic participation in both the states. Also the increase in literacy rate for women was a positive indicator. The chairperson, Ms. Lalnipuii, was of the view that divorced/ deserted women often do not have access to any legal systems. Ms Remliani, spoke of the double burden women involving reproductive and domestic activities and therefore relative decrease in participation of women in economic activities. The way forward that was suggested from the representatives from Mizoram was to treat women as a specific group, reduce women's workload, expand trade for street vendors and involve women in the planning process.

The Meghalaya State Representative, Ms. Loma N Jyrwa, Additional Director of Social Welfare, started her presentation, highlighting some of the positive status and position of women in the North East. Although the drudgery of women in some parts due to the hilly terrain where they have to travel long distance for collection of firewood and water cannot be overlooked. The issues of alcoholism, drug addiction, domestic violence, crime against women, rape continues to pose as challenge for women's overall empowerment. Referring to the 2001 Census and highlighting on some indicators (Literacy Rate, Infant Mortality Rates, Maternal Mortality Rates) and linking these with the problems of poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, high dropout rates, teenage pregnancy, broken marriages and divorce, and domestic violence, she explained the consequential effect on women and children. The matrilineal society entails higher responsibilities for women. She highlighted the schemes implemented by department like the Community and Rural Development, Labour Department, and the Social Welfare Department. One of the achievements in Meghalaya was the setting up of the State Mission Authority for Empowerment of Women which has been registered as a Society, and the State Resource Centre for Women is on the anvil.

Ms. Roshan Warjri, Chairperson, Meghalaya State Women Commission congratulated the organizers and spoke about non implementation of the State Council, Gender Cells and other

mechanisms with regard to the National Policy on Women Empowerment which came into force in 2001.

Dr. Kerma Lyngdoh, Chairperson of the Session summed up the session by saying that there were many international, national conventions committed to empower women socially, politically, and economically. The inaccessibility of basic services like health, education, along with restrictions on women's mobility, increasing workload, decreasing financial assistance and allocations for training/mentoring have posed as bottlenecks to women's overall development. It is imperative, therefore, that an integrated policy and strategy involving all Government Departments, Civil Society Organizations, and other players in achieving women's empowerment should be taken up at the earliest.

Technical Sessions

In addition to the above, the Conference comprised of 6 technical sessions spread over the course of 2 days. Sessions 1 and 2 were held on Day 1 and the remainder of the sessions was held on Day 2. To initiate the technical sessions, and as a background to the proceedings a brief on media engagement was presented during which 2 films were aired and later Ms. Hasina Kharbih, director IMPULSE and Ms. Beena Lakshmi Nepram, Founder Manipur Gun Women Survivors Network, spoke on their experiences of engaging with media strategies to further their work in the North East.

Session 1: Vulnerable & Marginalized Women: Challenges, Issues and Strategies for Convergence:

Ms. Veronica Pala, Assistant Professor Department Economic NEHU, also the chairperson for the session, introduced the speakers Ms Beena Lakshmi Nepram, Founder Manipur Gun Women Survivors Network, Dr Vanessa Kharmawphlang, Principal PGT College and the Government representative from Sikkim, Ms. K Subba.

The session highlighted the challenges including customary law in the context of Tribal society in North East India, property and inheritance, traditional institutions, poverty, education, health, violence/crime against women, economy, institutional mechanism, media, girl child, human rights, environment, migration and urbanization that needs to be addressed.

Session 2: Economic Empowerment- Strategies for Convergence:

This session was chaired by Ms. Manisha Behl, Advisor North East Network. The speakers included resource person from Meghalaya: Smt. Mildred Lawphniaw, Retd. Post Master General, Father Sunny Maveli, Director, Bakdil, West Garo Hills, Meghalaya and the Mizoram State Representative: Mrs. Remliani, Deputy Director, Social Welfare Department.

The session highlighted some of the challenges women face in the economic sphere: production is low, local marketing of products, lack access to credit and capital, lack of training or know-how in modernized technology, double burden faced by women, deteriorating nutritional status of women and children.

An on-ground experience of convergence shared during the session was how the Post Office partnered with NABARD in retailing and sales of products manufactured by the SHG groups. It had helped improve the habit of saving and thrift. Women of BPL families can open accounts as small as Rs. 50/-. Post Offices are institutions where money received from deposits are used to disburse safe loans. The Post Office had also partnered with the government for the NREGA Scheme, where wages are to be routed through banks and Post Offices. Women can open a zero balance saving with the post office. The Post Offices have a tie up with OIC, with just Rs 50 as initial saving of the members of SHGs or anyone else could have an insurance cover of one lakh rupees in case of accident death and that too with an additional payment of Rs 15. More than 2 dozen families in the North East benefitted from this scheme. The session also raised pertinent questions regarding the ownership and accountability issues around SHGs

DAY 2

The second days' deliberations started with the presentation of the agenda by Ms. Devika Singh Chauhan, Senior Project Adviser (Gender Rights, Gender Based Violence and Law Enforcement) NMEW.

Session 3: Women's Education: Issues and Efforts for Convergence:

This session was chaired by Shri P.P Srivastava, Hon'ble Member, North Eastern Regional Council, Shillong. The speakers included resource person from Meghalaya: Professor Debashish Chaudhury, Principal, Women's College, Shillong, Ms Mata Anilprana, Secretary,

Sri Ramakrishna Sarada Mission, Arunachal Pradesh and Dr. Deepankar Das, CEO, Centre for North East Studies.

In the session, the panel brought out a holistic approach on women empowerment through education. A school for girls based on Vivekananda ideologies formed an example of this approach in practice. There were discussions around women's home based work and their contribution in the health sectors. The right to Education act was also highlighted as a positive response. However, warning bell was sounded on a down slide in education in Meghalaya as signified by statistics presented. Some needs that were identified during the session were:

- Special arrangements for girls in exposure trips
- Balanced physical, intellectual and spiritual growth of women

A major learning from the session was that skill based education needs to be focused to enhance women's economic freedom and liberty. Cottage industries could be explored for empowerment of women economically.

It was suggested that the Government initiate programmes that combine skills and knowledge and thus build individuals holistically.

Session 4: Women's Health and Nutrition Issues: Efforts for Convergence

The chairperson for this session was Dr. Deepankar Das, CEO, Centre for North East Studies. Resource person from Meghalaya were: Dr. M. Shylla, Gynecologist, Ganesh Das Hospital, Shillong; and Dr. Rica Lamar, Ex-Vice Chairperson, Meghalaya State Commission for Women, Managing Director – Manbha Foundation.

The session brought out immediate factors that affect women's health and nutritional well being due to continuous pregnancy, prolonged lactation, long hours of work, poor dietary intake, repeated exposure to diseases, and limited access to health care.

Session 5: Access to Justice: Key issues and mechanism for convergence

The Chairperson for this session was Ms. Anuradha Paul, Advocate, Shillong. The speakers included resource person from Meghalaya: Ms. Hasina Kharbih, President - Impulse NGO

Network, Dr. Jennifer Liang, Action North East Trust (ANT), Assam and Mizoram State Representative: Mrs. Remliani, Deputy Director, Social Welfare Department.

Many challenges were highlighted during the session particularly on the “Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005” that aims at elimination of violence against women. The following issues were discussed regarding the implementation of the Act: dual responsibilities of the Protection Officers; counseling undertaken by the Probation Officers; non legal training of the Probation Officers who often face problems with language. It was suggested that professionals and experienced persons from social service background would perform better as Probation Officers and Protection Officers. Maintenance of a Resource Directory was suggested. As Meghalaya recorded the highest number of cases of Domestic Violence, Ms. Hasina Kharbih stressed the need for better coordination between the State Commission & Protection Officers, as their realm of work sometimes overlap. Human Trafficking is another alarming issue in the North East and often it is not restricted to trafficking for prostitution alone, women are trafficked on the pretext of better jobs, and to work as domestic workers etc. The “Immoral Trafficking Prevention Act”, 1956, does not address these other type of trafficking. In this regard a reference was made to the Meghalaya Model of a convergence effort of Police, Social Welfare, Judicial, and NGOs & Labour Department for tackling the issues around trafficking. Also it was highlighted that networking among various agencies is crucial to enable a fast track legal process where cases could be referred and transferred from one department through the other by the medium of internet.

The session brought out that the grassroots experience shows that justice delivery is a tedious and expensive process. Also legal aid to women still remains a distant dream in the North East as well as the rest of our country. Further, even if a woman decides to approach the courts she is weighed down with many hurdles like the quality of legal aid, attitude of the implementing bodies and the lengthy period of judicial processes. Often in villages, there are parallel community justice systems like the goan panchayats, women federations, and student body who offer legal recourse that are mostly preferred because the cases are settled out of court in a short span of time. However these systems are mostly gender biased. Besides there are no support systems such as police stations in the District level.

Session 6: Gender Budgeting & Gender Mainstreaming

The Chairperson for this session was Professor Keya Sen Gupta, I.I.M Shillong. The speakers included the resource person from Meghalaya: Professor Natalie West, Kharkongor, I.I.M. Shillong and Dr. Amiya Kumar Sharma Executive Director, Rashtrya Gramin Vikas Nidhi (RGVN), Guwahati.

During this session, the presentations by the resource persons were highly enriched by several questions from the audience. It was unanimously felt that mere allocation is not enough, it should be backed by strong policy incentive. There was also a discussion around Green Gender Budget. In the context of increasing quantum of funds being invested by the corporate sector in their businesses as well as in fulfilling their corporate social responsibility, the focus on gender budgeting in public expenditure of Government was felt to be lopsided. Therefore it was felt that Gender Budgeting should apply to the corporate sector as well. As the issue of transparency in (Government and Corporate sector) expenditures was immensely crucial it was felt that the details of transactions should be available in the public sphere (e.g. the internet).

Wrap-up Session: Taking the Women's Empowerment agenda forward through NMEW – Chalking out State Priorities and action ahead

The wrap up session synthesized the two day proceedings in a constructive manner. The session was co chaired by Shri. N. Sanyal, I.A.S., Additional Secretary & Mission Director, National Mission for Empowerment of Women, Govt. of India and Shri. N.S. Samant, I.A.S., Principal Secretary to Govt. of Meghalaya, Social Welfare Department. A detailed 'recap of proceedings' and 'the way forward', was presented by Smt. Rashmi Singh, Executive Director, National Mission for Empowerment of Women, Govt. of India.

The findings from all the sessions showed that the status of women in terms of social indicators is comparatively better as compared to other parts of the country, yet there is strong evidence of gender discrimination, social disparity, diversity of socio-ethnic groups within the region, lack of knowledge, ignorance of related issues, lack of communication and access to resources in remote areas.

Some of the identified critical areas of concern:

- Maternal mortality/infant mortality/declining child sex ratio and Nutritional imbalance, impact of conflict on women, broken families, early marriages, teenage pregnancy, trafficking, substance abuse, alcoholism and unsafe migration etc.
- Issues related to customary and traditional practices
- Multiple burden on women
- Role of women in decision making
- Women's contribute to the household income comes from mostly engaging in low paid informal/unorganised sector with precarious working conditions
- Vulnerability of women not confined to traditionally defined categories
- Trafficking is an issue encompassing the entire region
- Exclusion of women from the local durbar and Panchayati Raj Institutions
- Community justice systems and the role of tribal elders
- Tribal laws are not codified
- Inadequate use of social media

State specific issues and challenges were highlighted such as-

- Assam-Witch Hunting, anaemia and malnutrition, high drop out of girls in middle level
- Meghalaya- broken families (separation, divorce), teenage pregnancy, and alcoholism

Strategies, recommendations and suggestions included:

- Need for convergence of resources, ideology and effort and holding regular convergence meetings at all levels as well as need for convergence cells/forums
- Taking on board the existing bodies/functionaries/programmes for convergence
- Investing in Human Resources, e.g. identifying Gender Champions
- Need for a collective charter codifying and mandating the response processes and mechanisms
- Need for generating gender desegregated baseline data for identification, and influencing the Policies
- Actions based research to be conducted
- Keeping the regional perspective in mind there is need for broadening the categories of vulnerable and marginalised groups and women in difficult circumstances to also include widows, single and deserted women, women's husbands who are missing

- Need for regular reviews and monitoring of the Education System
- Convergence with other Departments for vocational training, better health etc.
- Single window system responsible for overall entitlements to women –Setting up of PSKs and SRCWs which can be served as repositories.
- Convergence Melas involving the Government representatives and CSOs
- Younger audiences need to be introduced to law and gendered understanding of issues. Simplified versions of laws, handbooks in local languages must be made available
- Holistic strategy for economic empowerment to be developed
- Rehabilitation strategies for women in conflict regions to be initiated. Also existing strategies need to be improved on the basis of content and coverage to make it more comprehensive.
- Responsibility/ accountability at all levels to be clearly defined which could also be State specific as per local requirements. The respective State Commissions to draft this along with the National Commission as per the guidelines.
- SMAs, SRCWs should be activated in all states while avoiding duplication of efforts
- Involving professional agencies in budget analysis from gender perspective
- Gender budgeting should be made mandatory for all states
- Capacity building/ continuous training and hand holding of government functionaries, joint trainings to ensure networking among departments, improved inter-personal communication could lead to effective convergence
- Accredited & Empanelled NGOs – to carry out the trainings and sensitization programmes
- Study and Scale-up of the best Practices
- Strengthening SHGs and formation of cooperatives, federations
- Enlarging the role of SHGs to not be merely treated as thrift and credit generation bodies but also as agents of social change
- Developing updated resource directories and interactive websites
- Single toll-free helpline for all women related issues should be started
- Involvement of SHG (women's group) and Panchayati Raj with the local authorities while implementing programmes for women
- Tapping on political willingness at the highest level
- Monitoring by community, e.g. social audit ensuring accountability for all schemes and programmes

- Charting out proper mandates and empower the institutions responsible for empowerment
- The IMPULSE Meghalaya model on 5 p's can be assessed and studied for scaling up
- Emergence of resource pool like Para legal (Meghalaya force can be studied as model) workers
- Strong fact based content to the media should be published/ broadcasted also the use the media should reach out to the masses

A final vote of thanks was jointly given by Ms. Devika Singh Chauhan, SPA – Gender Rights, Gender Based Violence and Law Enforcement, NMEW and Shri. H. M. Shangpliang, M.C.S., Director, Social Welfare Department, Meghalaya.

