

Women Empowerment in Sikkim - A Critical Study

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Abstract : Empowerment of Women is a necessary pre-condition for doing away with the myriad evils of gender discrimination and ensuring equality of opportunity – social, economic and political to the vast majority of the oppressed and economically backward women. Since, independence, the government of India has adopted several measures to ensure women empowerment through various judicial and legal measures. The National Women Empowerment Policy was passed by the Government in 2001. This research paper critically analyzes the issue of empowerment of women in the state of Sikkim. The state government and various non – state actors have taken various measures to ensure empowerment to the Sikkimese women. Even though in comparison with women in other states of our country, the situation of Sikkimese women is better, however, women in the state are still victims of various kinds of gender discrimination such as land rights, succession rights, besides an unfavourable sex ratio which needs to be addressed seriously by the political authorities.

Key Words – Women, Empowerment, Development, Sikkim, Government, Hindrances

I. INTRODUCTION

Development of Women is integral to achievement of sustainable development. For various socio, economic and cultural reasons, a vast majority of women remain excluded from the development trajectory and remain victims of myriad forms of gender discrimination. Empowerment of women can liberate women, specially those in underdeveloped countries from the fetters of gender discrimination and provide them an equal footing in society.

II. EMPOWERMENT AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Empowerment may be considered as a process which allows people to have their control over things which affect themselves and their well – being. The concept of women empowerment means developing awareness among women about their social, economic and political rights and enabling them to take independent decisions on matters which have an effect on their lives. The concept of Women Empowerment was coined at the International Women Conference at Nairobi in 1985. In defining Women Empowerment, the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNDFW) considers the following factors^[1]:-

- Gaining knowledge and understanding about gender relations and how these relations may change
- Instilling a sense of self – worth and self – belief to bring about necessary changes and to exercise the right to control one's life.

There are various dimensions of women empowerment such as social, political, legal, Economic, psychological, etc. The Beijing Conference in 1995 put forth certain quantitative and qualitative indicators of women empowerment. Some important quantitative and qualitative indicators are as follows^[2]–

Quantitative Indicators

1. Demographic trends such as maternal mortality rate, fertility rate, sex ratio, life expectancy at birth, average age of marriage
2. Access and control over community resources and government schemes
3. Participation of women in political process

Qualitative Indicators

1. Increase in self esteem and self belief
2. Increase in knowledge and awareness on health
3. Increase in access to information
4. Response to change in social customs

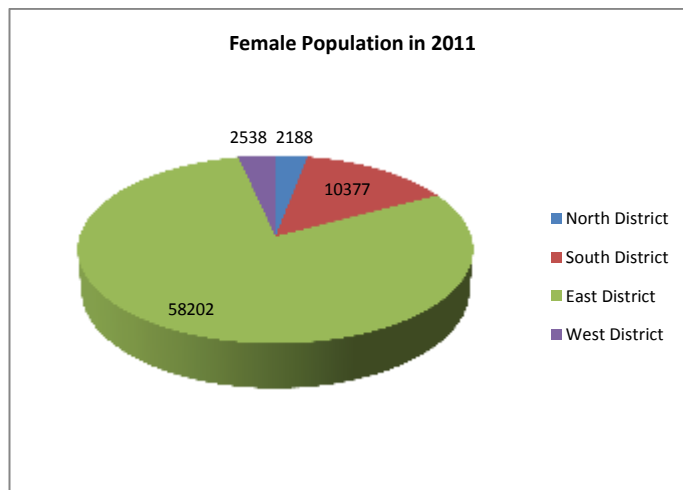
III. PROFILE OF WOMEN IN SIKKIM

Women constitute an important section of Sikkim's population. According to 2011 Census of India, the population of women in Sikkim was 287507 comprising 47.08 per cent of the total population. The sex ratio according to the 2011 census is 889 women : 1000 men. The female literacy rate is 75.61 per cent (2011 census)

Year	Female Population	Total Population	Percentage of Female Population to Total
1901	28219	59014	47.81
1911	42861	87920	48.75
1921	40229	81721	49.22
1931	53983	109808	49.16
1941	58231	121520	47.91
1951	65515	137725	47.56
1961	76996	162189	47.47
1971	97181	209843	46.31
1981	143945	316385	45.49
1991	190030	406457	46.75
2001	252367	540851	46.66
2011	287507	610577	47.08

Source : Census of India 2011

According to the above table, the female population of Sikkim is continuously on the rise after 1921. Moreover, the percentage of female population to total population is almost close to 50% consistently.



Source – Census of India, 2011

District	Female Population in 2011 Living in the Districts
North District	2188
South District	10377
East District	58202
West District	2538

Source – Census of India, 2011

From the above table & pie chart regarding female population living in the various districts of Sikkim, we can observe that the concentration of female population is mostly concentrated in the East & South District of Sikkim. The East & South District are among the most developed parts of Sikkim and larger concentration of women there means women are competing with men for access to resources.

IV. STATE INTERVENTIONS AND ROLE OF NON – STATE ACTORS

The Government of Sikkim has initiated several measures for empowering Sikkimese women. A brief description of such measures are as follows : -

1. Through The Sikkim Panchayat (Amendment) Bill 2011, the State Government raised women reservation seat from 40 percent to 50 percent in the Panchayat Raj Institution.^[3]
2. The Sikkim Succession Bill 2008 envisages to provide social empowerment by giving right to women to acquire or inherit property based on certain conditions.^[4]
3. **Sikkim State Commission for Women** – The objective of this statutory body constituted by the state on 12.11.2001 was to provide justice to the Sikkimese women through State Legal Aid Service Authority.^[5]
4. **Protection of women from domestic violence** - This particular Act executed from 17th May, 2007 envisages to provide quick civil and criminal remedies for aggrieved women and obtain relief.^[6]
5. **Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013** – The purpose of this Act is to enable a woman to lodge complaint against a harasser at workplace when she feels her dignity and morality is undermined.^[7]
6. **Small Family Scheme -** The objective of this scheme, launched in 1997 is prohibiting child marriage and discouraging early marriage among girl child.^[8]
7. **Chief Minister Rural Housing Mission** – The objective of this State Government Scheme is to convert the kutcha “unstable” houses to pucca houses. Moreover, women have been given priority to register the houses in their name.^[9]

Besides the above schemes, the State Government has initiated other measures such as 30 per Reservation for women in Government Sector jobs out of which 35 per cent belong to the minority Bhutia and Lepcha communities.^[10] . Moreover, all the government benefits are provided to the mother of a family.

The Non – State Actors such as NGOs, Cooperative Society and Self Help Groups (SHGs) are also actively working to create empowerment among the Sikkimese women. The Nayuma Women’s Cooperative Society (NWCS), the first women cooperative in Sikkim is playing an exemplary role in the sphere of women empowerment.^[11] The Cooperative Society has trained several young women entrepreneurs and provides an opportunity to SHG women to sell their products.

V. SIKKIMESE WOMEN EMPOWERMENT – THE REALITY

The Government of Sikkim along with various non – state actors have initiated several Measures to promote empowerment among the Sikkimese women. However, there remains certain hindrances on the way to achievement of complete empowerment for the Sikkimese women. In other words, the Sikkimese Women are not completely empowered. Following are some hindrances to women empowerment in the state :-

1. Sikkimese Women do not enjoy any inheritance rights. A Sikkimese women marrying a Non – Sikkimese person forfeits her property or inheritance rights after marriage. Besides such a women would also lose her Sikkimese identity. ^[12]
2. The Hindu Succession Act of 1956 do not apply to Sikkimese women belonging to Scheduled Tribes Category as the property and inheritance rights of such women are governed by their customary laws. ^[13]
3. Children born to Sikkimese women from marriage with a Non – Sikkimese shall have no claim on property rights and government benefits and jobs. ^[14]
4. There has been growing reports of domestic violence challenging the safety and security of women at home.
5. The sex ratio in Sikkim, according to the 2011 census is 889 females per 1000 males which is lower than the national figure of sex ratio of 940 females per 1000 males. ^[15]

Comparison of Overall Sex Ratio in Sikkim with Overall Sex Ratio in India (1971 – 2011)

Census Year	Overall Sex Ratio in Sikkim	Overall Sex Ratio in India
1971	863	931
1981	835	934
1991	878	927
2001	875	933
2011	889	940

Source – Sikkim Census of India for Various Years

From the above table regarding the comparison of the overall sex ratio in Sikkim with overall sex ratio in India for 1971 – 2011, we can note that the overall sex ratio in Sikkim is lower than that of our country continuously since 1971 pointing to the state’s declining sex ratio.

Distribution of Sex Ratio by Age Group

Age Group	F / M Ratio (Percent)
0 – 4	96.45
5 - 9	98.34
10 - 14	95.03
15 - 19	92.23
20 - 24	90.14
25 - 29	91.06
30 - 34	83.74
35 - 39	75.46
40 - 44	72.63
45 - 49	70.21

50 - 54	66.23
55 - 59	65.45
60 - 64	72.41
65 - 69	74.70
70 - 74	72.47
75 - 79	77.89
80 +	85.65
Age not stated	83.78
Total	87.80

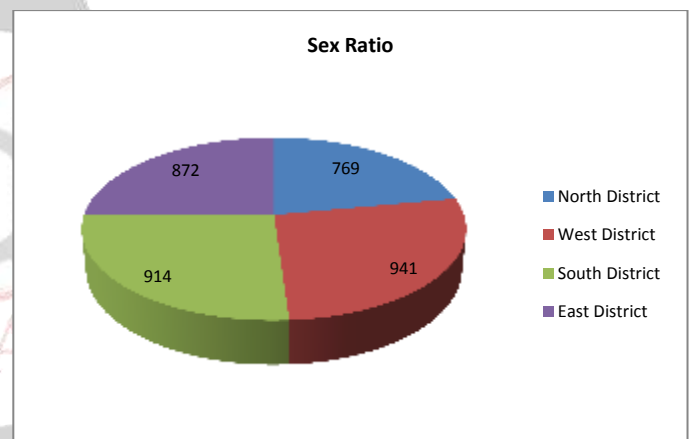
Source : Sikkim Development Report 2008

From the above table regarding the sex ratio of various age groups in Sikkim, we can note that despite an encouraging sex ratio in the age group 0 – 4 and 5 – 9, there is a decline in the sex ratio from the age category 25 – 29 till 55 – 59. This is due to various reasons such as early marriage, maternal mortality rate, etc.

Sex Ratio of Sikkim in various districts in 2011

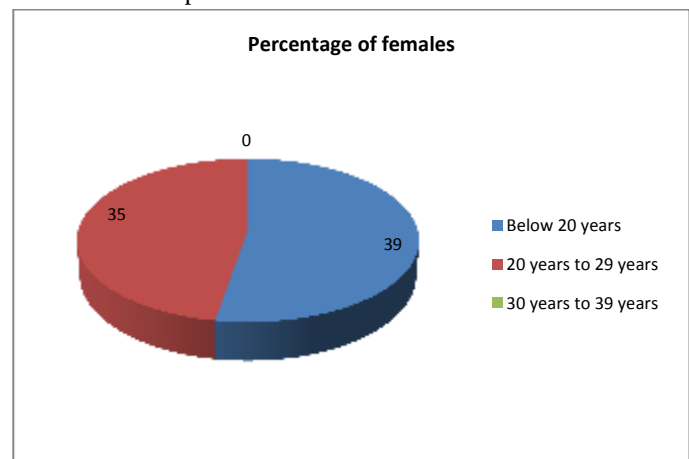
District	Sex Ratio
North District	769
West District	941
South District	914
East District	872

Source : Census of India 2011



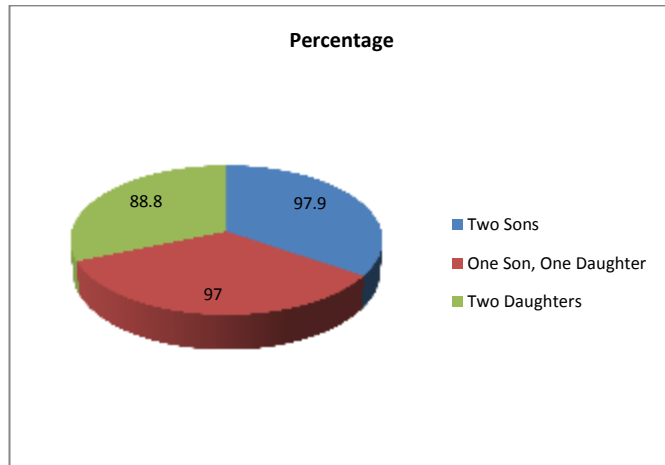
Source : Census of India 2011

From the table and pie chart, we can note that the sex ratio of Sikkim in 2011 is the highest in West District and the least in North District. This is because the West District of Sikkim is highly developed in infrastructure and other facilities in comparison with the North District.



Source : Infant Mortality Rate by mother's age 2005 – 06, NFHS – 3

From the above pie chart regarding infant mortality rate, we note that the infant mortality rate is the highest (39 %) in the age category below 20 years. This is due to various reasons such as early marriage, lack of attention towards maternal care, etc.



Source - Son Preference : Level and Trend in Sikkim (NFHS – 3)

From the above pie chart regarding Son Preference, we note that majority of people (97.9 %) have a preference for two sons pointing to an unfavourable sex ratio in Sikkim.

VI. CONCLUSION

Per Se, Women in Sikkim seems comparatively to be in a better position than women in other states of our country. Does this mean women are completely empowered in the state ? The reality is women in Sikkim are not completely empowered and they still have a long distance to travel in their quest for empowerment. Even though the State Government and various non – state actors have initiated various measures for women empowerment, an unfavourable sex ratio, which is a key indicator of a women's social position paints a discouraging picture of the status of women empowerment in Sikkim. Execution of various welfare measures by the State Government in conjunction with the efforts of various non state actors in the state is not adequate unless necessary legal reforms to ensure inheritance and identity rights are put in place. The State Government should pay special attention to improving the sex ratio of the state . The Sikkimese women need to be vigilant about their rights and should wage a relentless battle for achievement of complete empowerment.

VII. SUGGESTIONS

It is suggested that the Government of Sikkim should take special measures to improve the unfavourable sex ratio of the state through various measures and incentives aimed at correcting people's perception about women. The State Government should also focus on the balanced

development of all the districts of Sikkim since the North and East Districts have lesser sex ratio in comparison with the South and East Districts. Appropriate legal and social reforms are required to be made to ensure that Sikkimese Women get their rightful ownership in land and succession rights after marriage.

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