

# Interface between NGOs and Government in Meghalaya

Elizabeth Kharkongor, Assistant Professor, Ri Bhoi College, Nongpoh, Meghalaya

**Abstract-** *The problems of women and children have become multifarious and their communication to the concerned authorities remains unanswered. We find many organizations putting in efforts to protecting human rights around the world. Non-Governmental Organisation (NGOs) is one of such groups. The paper analysis the interface between the NGOs and Government of Meghalaya on various issues of Women and Child Rights in the State. Here the role of NGOs and their involvement in programmes and activities with the Government departments are projected.*

**Key words-** NGOs, Government, Interface, Meghalaya, Women, Child, Rights

**Objective-** The objective of the study is to find out the interface between NGOs and Government Departments on various issues of women and child's rights in Meghalaya.

**Methodology-** The study basically relies on primary sources. Hence structured interviews were conducted with government officials and Commissions and also with leaders of NGOs.

## Introduction

Meghalaya, one of the states in the Indian union, has a total geographical area of 22,429 hectares with a population of 29,66,889 (Female-14,75,057 and Male-14,91,832) and a literacy rate of 74.43% (Male-75.95% and Female- 72.89%) according to the census 2011. It has 11 districts namely, West Jaintia Hills, East Jaintia Hills, East Khasi Hills, West Khasi Hills, South West Khasi Hills, Ri Bhoi, North Garo Hills, East Garo Hills, South Garo Hills, West Garo Hills, South West Garo Hills. The capital of the state is Shillong.

Before discussing the whole process of interface between the NGOs and government departments, first it is important to discuss the meaning of interface. An interface is understood as a point where two systems or organisations meet and interact. In simple terms, interface implies the type of relationship between two organisations having similar objectives, activities and serving the same group of people.<sup>1</sup>

The International Women's Decade (1975-1985) coincided with India's Fifth and Sixth Five Year Plans, which have accorded a greater thrust on collaboration partnership of the government with the non- governmental sector at the micro and macro policies and programmatic levels. The Sixth Plan documents for the first time had incorporated a separate chapter on women's development. The Seventh Plan (1985-90) emphasised a clear policy on women based on an active Government-NGO collaboration on joint development thinking. To facilitate the functioning of the NGOs, the government provides special grant-in-aids to them.<sup>2</sup> There can be no dispute on the fact that NGOs have come to occupy focus of attention in social, economic and political landscapes across the globe.<sup>3</sup>

In Meghalaya, there are NGOs working on issues to uplift the poor and the downtrodden, to help people with

AIDS, drug problems, welfare of women and children, rights of the disabled, orphans and the aged. These NGOs register themselves with the government as per the Registration of Societies Act. The registered NGOs have to fulfil all the necessary criteria citing their objectives and specific areas of operation to get the registration done. Once registered, it is mandatory for the NGOs to submit the constitution or memorandum of association of the organisation before the Social Welfare Department, Government of Meghalaya, which deals with registration of NGOs. But there are NGOs who do not register themselves with the government and hence do not feel necessary for a constitution or any formal document to be submitted before the government.

## Discussions and Findings

In this study, four NGOs have been identified that mainly deals with human rights and particularly the rights of women and children in the state. Out of the four NGOs three were registered and only the Meghalaya Peoples' Human Rights Council (MPHRC) is not. North East Network (NEN), Impulse NGO Network (INGON) and Civil Society Women's Organisation (CSWO) were registered in the year 1995, 1996 and 2007 respectively.

Analysing the role of NGOs in Meghalaya, structured interviews were conducted with government officials and Commissions set up by the government. Views of the government officials and Chairpersons of Commissions, on the role of NGOs in general and the four identified NGOs operating in Meghalaya, varied from one to another.

Speaking with the Chairperson of the Meghalaya State Commission of Child Rights<sup>4</sup> on the role played by the NGOs in Meghalaya, she stated that issues on child rights violations are properly screened and after taking the issues into account, they have to be cautious in addressing them. The Commission coordinates with the Government authorities to make sure those issues brought out by the

NGOs are taken up. The Chairperson stresses that the Commission does not have much interaction with Impulse NGO Network except on human trafficking cases. On the issue of the 70,000 child labourers present in the coal mines of Jaintia Hills brought out by INGON in one of its reports, the Chairperson stated that the report is false. She said, "Of course we cannot deny that there were no child labourers, but that 70,000 which she (founder and chairperson of INGON) projected was false." The Chairperson mentioned about the Impulse model, developed by INGON, stating it as a good model to trace human trafficking. Turning her attention on other NGOs, she mentioned that the CSWO notify the Commission about several cases on violations of child rights in Shillong as well as any part of Meghalaya. Regarding Meghalaya Peoples Human Rights Council (MPHRC), she stated that there is no interaction with the Council as they have never approached the Commission till date. Regarding awareness programmes organised by the Commission, NGOs dealing with Child Rights are invited to attend such programmes. It is during these programmes that NGOs get in touch with the Commission and interact on various issues of Child Rights.

The Chairperson stated that the importance of the NGOs is felt as long as they do not override their boundaries and they sincerely work towards giving protection and bringing awareness to the people about Child Rights. Hence, issues brought out by the NGOs are considered as a good initiative.

To strengthen the relationship between the government and NGOs, the Chairperson stated that "We must have sincere and dedicated NGOs who do not have any self interest when it comes to giving justice to children because we have heard many a times that there are NGOs who come to the pretense of helping children to bring justice to them but when compensations are paid to families, the NGOs demanded money from such families." She stresses that such kind of NGOs are not wanted in the society. Trust is the main factor that strengthens the relationship between the government and NGOs. NGOs who work selflessly without any motive are good NGOs.

Another view of a government official from the Directorate of Social Welfare,<sup>5</sup> Government of Meghalaya, highlighted the relationship between the NGOs and the government. He stated that a cordial relationship is maintained between the department and some NGOs. When asked whether the government try to implement developmental programmes under the pressure of the NGOs, the officer said that policies and programmes are implemented under Acts of the government and not under the directives of NGOs. The Department of Social Welfare collaborated with NGOs on various programmes when expertise is needed or required. While setting up different Committees, the department also involve NGOs like NEN, SPARK and Shillong Reach Ministry. The State Level Inspection Committee is one such Committee that includes NGO members.

The officer also stated that NEN is very close with the department as the One Stop Crisis Centre is a part and parcel of the department because funds are provided by the department. Turning his attention to INGON, he said that in the past years, the department collaborated with the NGO in organising various programmes but at present there is no such collaboration anymore. He also said that there is no contact between the department and CSWO as well as MPHRC. CSWO is a pressure group and the department does not collaborate with such groups.

Responding to the question on the role played by NGOs in the field of women and child rights, the officer revealed that NGOs play an important role in protecting women and child rights in the state. The role played by them has both a positive as well as a negative impact. Stating the officer, "Issues raised by the NGOs have a positive impact from the point that if it's not because of the NGOs there will be no one to raise issues or voiced out but sometimes the issues raised by them are not relevant or beyond their boundaries which reflect the negative side of the NGOs. Just raising an issue is not enough. What is needed is a follow up till a case is closed. NGOs must not leave an issue halfway under the influence of other factors like money. It is appreciated if NGOs took up any issue wholeheartedly till the end."

According to the officer, NGOs contributed a lot by voicing out the issues of violations of women's and child's rights. He also acknowledged that in a democratic country the presence of NGOs is good because in case the opposition party is weak, NGOs are needed by acting like watchdogs on the government. He said that one cannot deny the contributions of the NGOs but besides this the presence and contributions of reputed and sincere NGOs, who took up the cause passionately and wholeheartedly till the end, are highly needed.

Lastly, the officer stated that the relationship between the NGOs and the Government must not be too cordial otherwise they will be blind to each other's weaknesses. "For example, if the government is defective somebody has to come out to the street and agitate." The NGOs need to criticise the government if its policies are defective and need to appreciate and encourage the government if its programmes are effective.

Another point of view is taken from the Police Department in order to see how the government and the NGOs interact with each other. In an interview with a police officer from the Police Department,<sup>6</sup> the purpose of some NGOs is founded to be based on self interest. There are NGOs who try to exaggerate cases for publicity only. When the police investigate a case brought up by an NGO, the department has to find out whether the allegations are true or not. But in most instances it turned out to be false. NGOs with self interest filed FIRs to earn a name in the newspaper and social media. The officer stated that the police department does not collaborate with CSWO but there is a lot of interface between the department and the Impulse NGO Network. The officer mentioned about the

software created by Impulse to track trafficking cases which is indeed very helpful not only to the different stakeholders but in helping out the victims who fall into the hands of traffickers. NEN is another NGO where the police department collaborated in many Awareness programmes and trainings. These programmes are very helpful especially for the police as they are sensitised on many issues relating to women rights. There are NGOs which are anti- government and anti-police and feel reluctant to work together with the government departments. But yet the officer acknowledged the contributions of NGOs especially in the rural areas where people are apathetic and ignorant. The presence of effective NGOs in the areas helped victims voiced their rights and hence women especially become aware of their legal rights.

A Senior Health and Medical Officer in Ganesh Das, a government hospital, was more enthusiastic about relations with the NGOs.<sup>7</sup> The Doctor asserted that the Health Department have a good relationship with the NGOs especially with NEN whom they collaborated in many programmes and activities. '*Iohlynti*', the One Stop Centre, was stationed in the hospital and hence doctors come into direct contact with victims of domestic violence as well as physical assault perpetrated by a husband or anyone in the society. Most of the cases that doctors received are physical assault and domestic violence. The doctor said that domestic violence is a primary health issue that affects the women not only physically but psychologically also. She continued by saying that it is because of NEN that counsellors are available in the hospital through the Centre. Counselling is very important because incidence of violence affects all aspects of functioning and women who are victimised in a domestic abuse can have multiple problems. She said "in their course of study as doctors, there is no chapter that stresses on violence against women, but through the programmes and training that NEN provided, doctors are being sensitised and trained how to deal with cases of sexual violence on women and how to treat such victims."

Many officers in the government department are not sensitised and do not understand much about the long term effects of domestic violence or any kind of violations of women's rights. This, according to the doctor has created much delay in setting up of the One Stop Crisis Centre. After much convincing and persuasion by the Chairman of NEN, the organisation was able to set up the Centre in collaboration with the Directorate of Social Welfare and Health and Family Welfare Department, Government of Meghalaya.

When asked about the role played by NGOs in protecting Women and Child Rights, the doctor gave a positive response by saying that NGOs do play a significant role in protecting the rights of women and children in the state. NGOs like NEN play a pro-active role. NEN adopts multiple strategies to improve the condition of women. Doctors and nurses are trained and

sensitised through various spectrum of programmes and activities and hence occupy an important place in the State.

Having discussed about the views and opinions of government officials on the role of NGOs as well as the relationship between the NGOs and the government, the study also brings out the opinion of NGOs on the interaction or interface between them and the government and the responses of government to their presence.

It is found that North East Network (NEN), works together with different departments of the government of Meghalaya to promote women's rights. The organisation upholds that the attitude of the government towards the organisation is co-operative and that the government also play a major role in protecting women's rights in the state. According to NEN, for an effective collaboration between the two sectors, the government and the NGO must always conduct formal meetings in order to achieve a common goal through verbal interaction. Another factor in bringing a good interface between them is that the NGOs must involve government personnel by informing them about their intended programmes and plan of actions on women's rights. NEN asserted that the NGOs and the government must collaborate together in organising seminars, workshops, projects, etc. Regular contact must be maintained between the government and the NGOs and media initiatives such as radio broadcasts and press release should be set up in order to promote a flow of information between the leaders of NGOs and government officials.

The Study has found that establishing an effective and co-ordinated relationship with the government is one of the most important aspects of North East Network. An effective working relationship is established between the NEN and the government in which it invite government personnel to trainings and awareness programmes.

NEN has been collaborating with the Police Department of the government of Meghalaya since 2009. NEN have been successful in training police personnel on gender sensitive issues. Cases referred by the police department to '*Iohlynti*' are increasing and clients have given a positive response on how the Police personnel handled cases in a gender-sensitive manner. In the year 2015-2016, according to NEN, 93 Police Officials were trained on issues of gender, VAW, Legal Remedies for women and child rights<sup>8</sup>. NEN is always in close touch with North Eastern Police Academy (NEPA) and many police officials under training were familiarises in several sessions conducted by NEN about human trafficking, legal remedies for women and children.

NEN is successful in collaborating with the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative in conducting studies about women police officers in Meghalaya. In the study, it is seen that the organisation is successful in bringing out the number of women in the police force which ranked Meghalaya as the third lowest state in India in terms of women representation in the police force. NEN submitted recommendations to the Home Department and

the Police Department in Meghalaya expressing the need for a more holistic policy framework to guide and integrate women in the police force.

In the course of NEN's works, it is found that NEN had facilitated a multi-sectoral collaboration between different government departments such as the Health Department, the Social Welfare Department, Meghalaya Police and the State Legal Services Authority. The outcomes of these collaborations have brought about the establishment of '*Iohlynti*', the One Stop Centre for Women, located at Ganesh Das Hospital, Shillong. This Centre is a joint initiative of NEN and the Health and Family Welfare and the Social Welfare Department, Government of Meghalaya. It is found that a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between NEN, the Social Welfare Department and the Health and Family Welfare Department of the Government of Meghalaya for the functioning and strengthening of '*Iohlynti*'.

Another outcome of NEN's collaborative efforts is that NEN and the Meghalaya State Police have been successful in bringing out a Training and Resource Manual for Police Personnel on Gender Sensitisation in the year 2009. This manual stresses on the role of the police stations within communities and how important are police stations as community institutions. It is found that the training module is very important for police personnel because of their crucial role in the criminal justice system.

Another collaborative effort between NEN and the Meghalaya Police helps the NEN team in Meghalaya in preparing a report titled '*Rough Roads to Equality: Women Police in Meghalaya*.' The report strengthened the knowledge base of NEN and the team is more familiar with the functioning of the police force and how violence and crimes against women are handled by the police.

NEN's collaboration with the Health Department Government of Meghalaya can be traced back to the year 2007 when a collaborative approach is adopted in addressing violence against women. NEN organises training of trainers, awareness programmes and workshops with doctors, nurses and counsellors in various hospitals and training institutes for nurses in the state. In 2015-16, 180 health care providers in Meghalaya have been trained on gender, VAW, basic counselling skills and legal remedies.<sup>9</sup> The collaboration with the department has led Ganesh Das Hospital transfer all cases of violence against women and children to '*Iohlynti*' because it is found that victims of violence needed counselling and legal support. As a result of this collaborative effort, Government hospitals in Shillong such as the Civil Hospital and Ganesh Das Hospital has officially constituted the medico-legal protocol guidelines for sexual violence cases issued by the Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare.<sup>10</sup> The guidelines have specifically been drawn up for rape cases and it is aimed at doctors on duty in government or private hospitals, who might be called upon to handle female victims of sexual assault or rape. Another outcome of the interface between NEN and the government is the

establishment of internal committees in 13 government institutions and one IT Company as mandated by the Sexual Harassment of Women at the Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal Act, 2013). All these efforts between NEN and the government in the state helped to further strengthen state's response to violence against women.

Turning our attention to another NGO mentioned in the study, it is found that a collaborated effort can also be seen between the Impulse NGO Network and the government departments. The Impulse Model designed by HasinaKharbhih, the founder of INGON, stresses the importance of the key stakeholders which includes the government departments, law enforcement agencies, judiciary, civil society and the media. The impulse model focuses on team effort of government agencies and NGOs during rescue, repatriation, rehabilitation and re-integration of trafficking victims. Once a victim is rescued, he or she is provided with shelter run by the Social Welfare Department or any NGO. This process is followed by medical assistance which can be provided only by the Health Department. Repatriation of victims is done with the help of the police department.

INGON collaborated with the Anti-Human trafficking unit of the Meghalaya police to create awareness about human trafficking and put in efforts to curb the problem. The police department has special cell for women and children where Anti-Human Trafficking Unit (AHTU) was created in all districts of the state. Hence it is understood that since INGON deals mainly with anti-human trafficking, the interaction and interface between AHTU and INGON is very important. The NGO lauded the Anti-Human Trafficking Unit of the state police for strong partnership and support to the NGO throughout their journey in fighting trafficking.<sup>11</sup>

A Handbook for Law Enforcement on Trafficking in Persons 2006, was created by Impulse NGO Network and North Eastern Police Academy and supported by UNODC. The handbook was created to offer basic training to law enforcement personnel to help them combat human trafficking in their jobs.<sup>12</sup> Hasina, the team leader of INGON said: "We understand that the issue of human trafficking is too big to be handled only by a few NGOs. The government agencies and other stakeholders have to be involved."

INGON acknowledged that local administration and the judiciary which constitutes of lawyers are not sensitive enough to the rights of children. Hence, INGON involved lawyers in open dialogues where discussions on children's rights are conducted on 6<sup>th</sup> of June 2001. INGON has once represented the state government of Meghalaya in the Colloquium on "The Child in the North East" organised by North Eastern Council and UNICEF at Hotel Pinewood Shillong on 4<sup>th</sup> December, 1999.

As stated by an officer of the social welfare department, Government of Meghalaya, that the department

and INGON collaborated in many programmes in the past, one such programme that INGON participated was on 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> November 2000, where INGON presented data and case studies in the workshop on Meghalaya State Plan of Action on Children organised by Social Welfare Department.

After discussing the interface between INGON and the government departments, another NGO captured in the study is Civil Society Women's Organisation (CSWO). A question that arise here is did the CSWO establish any interface with the government? To find out the answer to this question let us see what the President of the organisation has to say about this.

The President of CSWO pointed out that the organisation does not work together with the government. She complained that the government does not support her since she is trying to unveil corruption cases of the government. Mistrust and resentment are still very much prevalent between CSWO and government departments like the police and the social welfare department. She clearly stated that "the social welfare department is anti-social" which goes against the welfare of the people especially of women victims of domestic violence. According to her, Police officers were rude and legal prosecutors are not efficient since they are under the influence of politicians. Hence, cases are being infringed and politically manipulated to serve the interest of the political elites.

Furthermore, she stated that the organisation does not have faith in the government and thinks that the government is not protecting women's rights in the state. The appointment of a legislator, who raped a 14 year old girl, as a member of the Privilege Committee and the Committee on Subordinated Legislation by the government of Meghalaya severely, undermined her trust in the government. Looking at the other side of the picture, it is found that government officials feel that CSWO is anti-government. Hence the information given by the President of CSWO and the reaction of the government indicated that CSWO and the government's interface has been very weak because of lack of trust and understanding between them.

Meghalaya People's Human Rights Council (MPHRC) is another human rights organisation where the interface with the government is focused in the study. Speaking with the Chairman of MPHRC,<sup>13</sup> it is found that the organisation does not collaborate with the government because the Chairman thinks that the government does not play a role in protecting women's rights. The reason behind this is the lack of social cohesion or lack of people's consent, ineffective governance, corruption and lack of honest and dedicated politicians. The Chairman of MPHRC stated that the attitude of the government towards the organisation is not co-operative. He also stated that NGOs and the government are always in conflict. Another reason for the lack of co-operation is that there is a communication gap between the government and NGOs.

Sometimes proposals made by the NGOs had been sitting on government employees' desks for months without comments or action and many a times e-mails go unanswered. The approaches of the government and NGOs are very different and hence the Organisation does not interact with the government.

**Conclusion-** After analysing the interface between NGOs and the government, the study revealed that in terms of communication and interaction, there is noticeably a mixed response from the government officials. Some departments were able to establish an effective interface with some of the NGOs while having negative views on other NGOs. From the perception of the NGOs too it is found that only NEN and INGON were able to have a positive interface with the government departments while CSWO and MPHRC have a different view about the government which led them to isolate themselves from involvement with the government. Hence, a complementary role by both the actors is needed to bring about a just society where every human being especially women and children exercises their rights to the fullest expectations.

## References

- <sup>1</sup>Rajasekhar D & Biradar R.R (ed.), *Reluctant Partners Coming Together: Interface between People, Government and the NGOs*, Concept Publishing, New Delhi, 2004, p.7.
- <sup>2</sup>Seema S Singha & Chimun Kr Nath (ed.), *NGOs in North East India: A Kaleidoscopic Observation*, DVS Publisher, Guwahati, 2011, p.270.
- <sup>3</sup>Bimal J Deb (ed.), *Development Priorities in North East India*, Concept Publishing, New Delhi, 2002, p.173.
- <sup>4</sup>Based on an interview with the Chairperson of the Meghalaya State Commission for Protection of Child Rights on 23<sup>rd</sup> October, 2017.
- <sup>5</sup>Based on an interview with the Child Welfare and Probation officer of the Directorate of Social Welfare on 24<sup>th</sup> October 2017
- <sup>6</sup>Based on an interview with a Police Officer in Shillong on 25<sup>th</sup> July, 2017.
- <sup>7</sup>Based on an interview with a Senior Health and Medical Officer in Ganesh Das Hospital, Shillong on 28<sup>th</sup> October, 2017.
- <sup>8</sup>NEN's Annual Report 2015-2016 p.20.
- <sup>9</sup>*ibid*, p. 22
- <sup>10</sup>*Ibid*.
- <sup>11</sup><https://Shillongtoday.com> accessed on 2<sup>nd</sup> November, 2017
- <sup>12</sup>Impulse Model Replication Handbook for Stakeholder to Counter Human Trafficking, Impulse NGO Network, 2015.P.37.
- <sup>13</sup>Based on an interview with the Chairman of MPHRC on 25<sup>th</sup> July, 2017.