

Challenges And Opportunities For Women's Empowerment In Assam: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

Women empowerment is a vital topic in the present context and an important variable for social change. The present paper attempts to analyze the challenges and opportunities of women's empowerment based on various indicators based on some data from secondary sources. The study explains that the women of Assam are less empowered than their male counterparts and they enjoy lower status than men despite numerous efforts undertaken by the government. The paper finds that there is a vast gender gap prevailed in access to education, employment, and household decisions. Household decision-making power and freedom of movement are very much varied with their age, educational attainment, and employment status. Fewer women have their say in the important family decision which is a major cause of women's backwardness. Women's less control over their assets is also observed in the study which is a major concern for women empowerment. Rural women are more prone to domestic violence because rural women are reasonably less educated and unaware of their domestic rights. The study observes that the major cons of women empowerment in India and Assam are lack of quality education lack of employment opportunities for women, social barriers, and harmful attitude of society towards women empowerment.

Keywords: Women's empowerment, household decision, domestic violence, the gender gap, Society, Empowerment, Gender, Discrimination, Development, Participation.

Introduction:

In the North Eastern region essentially comprises of eight states and Assam is one of them. The states of eastern region are considered as the diffident area in terms of the per capita income. The socioeconomic set up of the state has not been favourable to on the whole progress. Since it is a mixed state with heterogeneous cultural backgrounds, it has been experiencing revolution and ethnic conflict for the last three decades because of which not only its economy but also the social construction is under risk. The most awful sufferers in the process are the women. The term empowerment will bring the impartiality among the society. Training for better efficiency does not suffice because women need decision making capacity and ability to organize and take part in community and national activities. All countries share a general characteristic. Their women are unable to give their best to the national development. The resulting curriculum and materials help

prepare women for self-development as active members of their family, community and nation. They seek overall personal development and account for the notorious double accountability that women shoulder as economic producers and as mothers and wives. The hidden power of women and her useless voices will come up through the multidimensional process of empowerment. The word itself consist the term 'power'. To understand this process for women s of Assam special aspects should be considered and deliberated. women is best described by the maxim stated by the first prime minister of India Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, "To awaken the people, it is women who must be awakened; once she is on the move, the family moves, the village moves and nation moves." The author highlighted that there is considerable progress in the overall enrolment of girl students in schools from primary level to secondary level in Assam state. He states that the term empowers means to give lawful power or influence to act in a way they deem to be essential. Author observes that female empowerment promotes economic development. This study analyses and suggests that finance concentrated in the hands of mothers gives more reimbursement to children. This study developed a series of non-cooperative family bargaining models to recognize what kind of frictions can give rise to the observed empirical relationship.

Objectives of the study:

To study the challenges and opportunities in respect of women empowerment in Assam the following objectives are defined. To, highlight the importance, challenges and opportunities of women empowerment in Assam.

Methodology:

Allowing for the nature of the topic, this paper is based on both descriptive and analytical methods. In this paper, an effort has been made to analyze the empowerment in Assam the data acquired and used in it is purely based on secondary sources according to the need of the study.

Why need for women empowerment?

The term empowerment has become popular in the era of 1980's. Women empowerment is the most imperative element that contributes to significant issues of gender and development. While discussing the category of women in society one has to meet head-on the issues coming in the way of women in their march towards de-facto equality. One has to think why despite progress in education, economic and social awareness, there is gender discrimination and gender injustice. It is important to consider the situation from a women's perspective and assess the status of women with some definite parameters. In a country like India with a diversity of languages, customs and cultures, and chain of command based on caste and classes and variety of religions and sectors it is very difficult to draw a simplified, common conclusion on the parameters of women empowerment. The dignity and status of a society can be measured from the facilities enjoyed by women in that society. The empowerment of women is found to be a significant key for the resolution to many social problems. The empowerment of Women is central part to the human

development. There are different scholars who have given definitions to the term in the context of women. According to Kabirr (1989) interprets it as a redial conversion of power relations between women and men 'so that women have greater power over their own lives and men have less power over women's lives'. According to Kate Young (1993), empowerment enables women to take manage of their own lives, set their own objective , organize to help each other and make demands on the state for hold up and on the society itself for change'. Empowerment is a multidimensional perception, it becomes difficult to define. When a woman is free of made power and can make independent choices, she is said to be empowered. When a woman is empowered, she develops self self-assurance and self esteem which leads to the overall development. Empowered women always have various opportunities in her life and can make use of it to its full potential. Her empowerment can be reflected in the indicators like womanly literacy rate, Participation rate etc.

What is Women empowerment meant by:--

In simple words, it is the creation of an atmosphere where women can make independent decisions on their capabilities as equal as men in society. Women are supposed to be treated as equals with men as they contribute equally in household activities with that of men. This can only happen if there is a significant change in the mindsets of the members of the towards empowerment of women. Women Empowerment refers to mounting and improving the social, economic, political, and legal awareness of the women, to ensure equal rights to women, and to make them confident enough to claim their rights, such as:

- To live freely their lives with a intellect of self-worth, respect, and dignity;
- To gain be in command of of their lives, in all important aspects of day to day life;
- To play a significant role in making choices and decisions;
- Have equal rights to access to social, religious, and public actions like their male counterparts.
- Enjoy equal social status in the society;
- Have equal rights for social and economic integrity;
- Determine financial and economic choices;
- Get the equal chance for education;
- Get equal employment chance without any gender bias;
- Get access to a safe and pleasing working atmosphere;
- Women have the right to get their voices heard etc.

Discussion :

In spite of different significant measures that have been adopted by the government of India still, we can observe the pathetic scenario of women empowerment even after 77 years of independence. We may be proud of women in India occupying the highest offices of decorum like President, Prime Minister, Lok Sabha Speaker, leader of the opposition, Chief Minister or women occupying highest positions in the business sector but the fact remains that we still witness dowry deaths,

domestic, violence, and exploitation of women. It is often said that women's work in the private sphere cannot be conventional as a contribution to the national economy as it is not paid. It is also said that they are not capable of hard physical labour and for this reason, women workers are poorly paid in cultivation and factories, in judgment to their male workers and we see difference in wages. The issue of women's work is very complex and it is tricky to compute correct data of women's work participation.

Challenges of women empowerment in Assam

Numerous challenges are being faced in this respect, some major challenges are discussed as under:----

(1) Education : -

As far as education is concerned, there is a huge gap between women and men in rural India which is a major difficulty in the empowerment of women. The circumstances of illiterate women in India is considerably a miserable one as they have to depend on the male members of their family for their needs that have lowered their status in their society. Bridging this gap and encouraging women about their status enjoyed by the women at the international level is an important step that will basically contribute to the development of the existing situation of intolerance, negligence, and exploitation of women.

(2) Poverty in Assam :-

About a third of the country's population lives on less than per day. The GINI index keeps increasing gradually over the years, indicating that the uneven distribution of wealth of Assam in the country is increasing, currently advancing a little close to 53.9. Poverty is considered the greatest threat to peace in the Assam, and eradication of poverty should be a national goal as important as the eradication of illiteracy. Due to grinding poverty, women are found to be browbeaten in domestic help and women having meager and irregular income are prone to the domination of male members of the family. In addition to this, it is evident that sex slaves are directly connected with the elements of poverty which is a curse for society. If poverty is lowered in a society then their girl child will have the chance to chase their ambition without being victimized by sexual management, a domestic violation.

(3) Health & Safety:-

The health and safety concerns of women are paramount for the wellbeing of a country and are an important feature in gauging the empowerment of women in Assam. However there are major causes of concern regarding where maternal healthcare of rural women in Assam. UNICEF report 2009 came up with shocking figures on the status of new mothers in Assam. The maternal mortality report of Assam stands at 404 per 1000, with as many as 78,000 women in India dying of childbirth complications in that year. Today, due to the explosion of population of the Assam, that number is about to get increased considerably. The main causes of maternal mortality are:-Hemorrhage: 30%, Anaemia: 19%, Sepsis:

16%, Obstructed Labour: 10%, Abortion: 8%, Toxaemia: 8%. Although numerous programs have been set by the Government of Assam and several organizations in the country, there is still a substantial gap prevalent in this issue

(4) Professional Inequality:

Professional disparity is practiced in employment and promotions. Women face countless handicaps in male adapted and dominated environments in Government Offices and Private enterprises

(5) Morality and Inequality: Due to gender bias in health and nutrition, there is an unusually high mortality rate in women reducing their population further especially in Assam state.

(6) Household Inequality

Family relations show gender bias in infinitesimally small but major manners all across the globe, more so, in Assam e.g. sharing the responsibility of household chores, childcare, and menial works of so-called distribution of work. Grinding Poverty and age-old illiteracy of women worsened these complications and remedies to problems that women are far-reaching devoid of proper measures. The empowerment of women is closely linked with a guarantee of their health and safety.

(7) Source of livelihood: - Total female work participation, 90% women are in the unorganized sector. Out of this, 80% are in cultivation area and rest 20% are in the field of construction, factories and household labour. An extensive number of women are engaged in the unorganized sector for long hours in poorly managed working conditions with meager wages and without any safety tool of redressal of their grievances and legal protection against utilization. Women are found to be more sincere and productive in their assigned duties as compared to men and contribute significantly to nation-building. Women from rural and tribal areas migrate to urban areas and are reported to be prone to insecure and unorganized sectors like structure labourers, stone-cutting, food processing, selling vegetables/ fruits, etc.

Opportunities for the women's empowerment in Assam

In the last three decades the perception of women empowerment has undergone through a change of various aspects. The status of women in the north eastern region is to some extent different in comparison to rest of the regions. The social evils like purdha system, dowry, violence is absent in the state of Assam. Still there is lack of mobility for women in the state.

- Assam Human Development Report (2003) sheds light on discrepancy in the achievement between men and women of Assam in different spheres of life. The report viewed that poverty; violence and lack of participation were the main issues of concern for Assam.
- Act of Assam State Commission for Women in January, 1994. It is a statutory body under the State Act which strives to achieve equity and justice. It provides a stage for realizing the anticipation of millions of women in the state and gives them a chance to work hand in hand & shoulder with the men in the development process of the state.

- Assam state commission for women is working to cherish the goal of impartiality and justice in the state.
- **Sex Ratio of women:-** Sex ratio is one of the imperative demographic factors that signify the status of women in a particular society. In Assam there are 954 female per 1000 males. The ratio of women is lower in Assam as compared to the other four states of the region. Improvement of Sex ratio indicates a healthy growth rate among female to male residents. When the female ratio increases, it signifies a better growth for the developing economy. It can boost the backward regions in Assam.
- **Literacy:-** Female literacy rate of women in Assam State States Census (%) Assam 67.3 Arunachal Pradesh 59.7 Meghalaya 73.8 Manipur 73.2 Nagaland 76.7 Tripura 83.1 Mizoram 89.4. Source: Census of India 2011. There can be various reasons for low literacy rate in the state. The social evil poverty which leads to the dropouts of the children and further complicated the problem.
- Discrimination is the other reason which is existing. Although Government has made many efforts through the formulation of policies and programmes like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and District Primary Education Programme are among the various education plans.
- Female Workforce Participation The table below is reliving the fact of female work force participation. Women face enormous challenges in the work place due to harassment and destruction and injustice. Due to this, the lack of participation is persisting among the women. In the case of Assam, the participation rate is much lower. The better work participation comes from the education and better awareness generation which is lacking in the state. Most of the women in Assam are engaged into the farming labour. It means they are occupied into the primary activities more. Only to substantiate the basic needs of women is not enough, to provide economic and the political support is also necessary.
- The development of the good infrastructure is not the solution of the problem; it is needed to work on the ground level to empower women. That would be come to know by their decision making power and to enlarging their choices.
- Female Workforce participation of women in Assam State Source: NSSO, 2010 Health conditions of women. If we talk about the health conditions of women, it is the primary and the basic need. If it is fulfilled then all the magnitude of empowerment can be achieved easily.
- National Family Health Survey - III Pertains to data collected on various indicators of women empowerment. The table is showing the Anaemia in the middle of the women of Assam state. It can be seen that the rate is very high. Iron lack among the women, who are pregnant or lactating is very common and it happens due to insufficient and improper diet.
- Health schemes for women. There are several schemes for women in Assam which is for the benefit of women, they are centrally and state sponsored. Below are the schemes which focus on the issues of health, education, employment and other advantages for women.

- Janani Surkhya Jogana(JSY) is an Indian Government scheme and it was launched on 12th April 2005 by the Prime Minister of India. Its aim is to reduce the neo-natal and maternal deaths happening in the country by promoting institutional delivery of new born.
- **Mamoni Scheme:** The Assam government introduced the **Mamoni scheme** in the state under the National Rural Health Mission (NHRM). The aim of the scheme is to reduce **Maternal Mortality Ratio**. This scheme encourages the expectant women to undergo 3 ante-natal checkups so that any danger indication could be detected during pregnancy at earliest and proper treatment could be offered. The pregnant woman also receives 1000 rupees.
- **Majani Scheme:** Through this schemes government has enthused the parents having female child. An amount of rupees 3000 has been fixed during the birth of the female children and whenever she will attain 18 years, she will get this money. The "Janani Sishu Suraksha Karyakram (JSSK)" also provides for free transport from home to institution, between facilities in case of a recommendation and a drop back home. Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY) is a safe motherhood intervention under the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) being implemented with the objective of reducing maternal and neo-natal mortality by promoting institutional delivery among the poor pregnant women.
- **The Ministry of Women and Child Development:-** under Government of India set up a scheme for women in difficult accident known as Swadhar. The main objective of the scheme is to focus on the marginalized and the poor girls living in the difficult circumstances. The scheme provides basic needs like food, shelter and also the economic and social support. The schemes which are introduced are for the betterment of the women and to improve their health conditions. The health status of women can become better if they utilizes the government schemes at its best, but that also needs the awareness generation among them. The health service distribution system needs to be stronger at the ground level.
- The staff at the ground level needs to be strengthening so that qualitative output can be achieved. If we talk about the modern term 'Globalization' that will be best suited in the developed countries, since when we talk about the developing countries and the backward regions like Assam, then it will not help the poor women where lack of consciousness and illiteracy is persisting. Therefore an attempt has been made to see rural women's health aspects at a better position by the government. Women participation in every field is necessary. Empowered women have the freedom to do choices and take .
- Assam poses sometimes doubts on the efficacy of the empowerment variable. This is because of the actuality that strong family-based construction of Indian politics makes it difficult for women to emphasize self-governing or self governing political choices, as distinct from the male headed families or patriarchy. Even employment is the important indicator of empowerment. If, the women is employed the sense of independence will arise which would help women to build their skills. The dignity and culture of a society can be detected from the status of women in that society.

- **Constrains of Women Empowerment in Assam** :- Education is considered as a gateway towards empowerment. It produces opportunities and choices for women. Empowered women can play role in the social revolution because they know the roles and duties towards the society which leads to development. But due to various constraints and burden of responsibilities women do not able to step up towards the door of growth. Especially when it comes to the backward states their development gets a hindrance. Below mentioned are some of them. In Assam early marriage is one of the chief barriers which hinder the girl's further studies. The anxiety of parents towards the girl's future becomes hindrance in her development. It can be seen more in the rural areas where lack of awareness is existing. In the backward areas supplementing the basic needs, which can be fulfilled through earning of the family is more important rather than gaining education and moving towards empowerment. In such situation the education becomes burden on the family.
- **The feedback system** should be made compulsory so that timely responses and the opinion of the women can help in civilizing the status. If possible, media campaigns should also be done highlight the issues of women. Others will also understand the importance of it. Revolving funds can be helpful for the microenterprise development.
- **Development of Education:** Education development is the backbone of our women's empowerment. The government provides some special services for women, especially for the girl child. Priority should be given to the education of women which is the grass root problem Nehru also said about the importance of women's education that 'education of boy is the education of one person, but the education of a girl is the education of the whole family'.
- **Health awareness:** The government of India announces various schemes for health, especially for women. So happy family life mostly depends on the good health of the women.
- **Political Participation:** The government provides more opportunities for participation of women in politics or in the administrative system by providing reservations up to 33 percent.
- **Employment of women Association:** Different women Association at the state level, national level, and international level has been playing an active role in securing women. So, the government of India also must encourage and provide necessary assistance to the women associations for empowering them.
- **Expansion of Cottage Industry:** The government must give more importance to the expansion of various kinds of small and cottage industries in rural areas to provide more employment opportunities to women.
- **Expansion of Mahilya Bank Branch:** The Government of India newly announced to open Mahila Bank for women especially in few cities in India and expanding their branches

in various cities; towns and village areas then the women get more benefit for their empowerment.

- **Special Women Security Force:** The government must give importance to the establishment of a special Women Security Force by a constitutional provision in the country with special power to take immediate and necessary actions against the persons involved in any kind of violent activities against the women in the society.
- **Awareness programmes** need to be organized for creating awareness among women especially those belonging to weaker sections about their rights.

CONCLUSION :-- In the concluding remark, it is drawn that it is a matter of serious concern that if women of a country like India are not empowered the whole country shall have to suffer in respect of the important indicators of Human Development. As half of the total inhabitants in the country consists of women so without empowering their nation cannot progress. It is difficult to understand how slow-moving the cultural exchange of the world is when we find out that there are several places across the country where some undesirable customs are practiced that are detrimental to women's empowerment and social change.

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