

Available online at <http://www.ijims.com>

ISSN - (Print): 2519 – 7908 ; ISSN - (Electronic): 2348 – 0343

IF:4.335; Index Copernicus (IC) Value: 60.59; Peer-reviewed Journal

Women Economic Empowerment and Human Development in Assam: A Gender Perspective

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Abstract

Gender indicates the socio-cultural position of men and women and the way society allocates roles and responsibilities. Gender inequality is distinct from other forms of economic and social discrimination still present in the Indian society despite various steps taken by the government to ensure the economic, constitutional, educational and social improvements women, especially those living in rural areas. However, empowerment of women and gender equality are two vital issues of development process of any state and to achieve this gap between women and men in terms of capacities, access to resources and opportunities. The development theorists believed that a high level of human development would lead to empowerment of women and conversely highly empowered women would bring high level of human development through their contribution to the development process. This paper tries to examine the relationships between women economic empowerment and human development. Focus has been also made to analyze the factors that lead to the development of female status and increasing gender equality.

Key Words: Women, gender equality, Assam, Human development.

1. Introduction:

Gender equality and women's empowerment are integral to human development. Since the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995, considerable progress has been made, yet in the mean while along with existing shortfalls, new and extensive challenges have emerged, pertaining both to women status and the full realization of their human rights. Economic empowerment is the capacity of women and men to participate in, contribute to and benefit from growth processes in ways that recognize the value of their contributions, respect their dignity and make it possible to negotiate fairer distribution of the benefits of growth. When the objective of the development process is to empower the women economically in order to improve their position in the society and to make them independent financially, it is generally said as economic empowerment of women. Investing in women's economic empowerment sets a direct path towards gender equality, poverty eradication and inclusive economic growth. Women can make enormous contributions to economies, whether in businesses, on farms, as entrepreneurs, or by doing unpaid care work at home. But they remain disproportionately affected by poverty, discrimination and exploitation. Gender discrimination means women often ended up in insecure, low-wage jobs and constitute a small minority of those in senior positions. It curtails access to economic assets such as land and loans. It limits participation in shaping economic and social policies.

The Human Development Approach which evolved as a broader measure of welfare of a nation was based on the premise of development of people irrespective of gender through enhancement of three essential human capabilities such as long and healthy lives, knowledge and income and assets needed for a decent standard of

living. The development theorists believed that a high level of human development would lead to empowerment of women and conversely highly empowered women would bring high level of human development through their contribution to the development process. This paper tries to make an attempt to study the status of women economic empowerment in the state of Assam and state of human development. Also it addresses the issues relating gender inequalities in the field of education and health.

2. Literature Review:

Rakesh et al. (1998) in their study revealed that women's economic participation was more than 66 per cent in five operations namely sowing (70.00%), intercultural operation (77.50%), harvesting (86.83%), threshing (70.83%) and storage of produce (89.17%), but women were not dominating in four operations i.e., seed treatment (5.83%), fertilizer application (9.17%), irrigation (3.83%) and plant protection (5.83%).

Findings of Kishor and Gupta (2004) revealed that average women in India were disempowered absolutely and there have been little change in their empowerment over time. The authors viewed that there were several cogent and pressing reasons for evaluating, promoting and monitoring the level of women's empowerment in India, not the least of which was that household health and nutrition were generally in the hands of women and their empowerment were necessary to ensure not just their own welfare but the wellbeing of households. They also asserted that empowerment was critical for the very development of India, as it enhanced the quality and quantity of human resources available for development.

Blumberg (2005) viewed that economic empowerment of women was the key to achieve gender equality as well as wealth and well being of nation. The author opined that financial autonomy would enhance women's capacity of decision making in various arenas of life. Moreover, it would lead to less corruption, less armed conflict and less violence against female in the long run.

Mikkola and Miles (2007) in their study reviews economics literature on the relationship between gender equality and economic development. Stylized facts indicate that womens' roles are, although restricted, in the midst of quite dramatic change, both in developing and in developed countries. Results of both empirical and theoretical research, explanatory models and studies exploring both forces that challenge and those that facilitate greater equality are presented. The literature covers issues in gender inequality and economic development as they relate to: values and religion, cultural restrictions and roles, legal and inheritance laws and practices, education of girls, resource allocation within marriage patterns, labor market access, education, fertility, gender specific market failures in finance, and power in the political decision making. They suggest that the findings in the literature are compatible with the long term trends in womens' roles in western countries that stem from technological improvement, as industrialization has made extensive home-based production obsolete, and reduced the demand for children. In this case, greater gender equality would be rather a consequence than a cause of development.

To study the women education and rural economic development of the Bodo community of Assam, Talukdar (2012) has made a case study on the present women educational status of the Bodo community of Assam along with the problems associated with it and the role of women in upliftment of the rural economy of Assam. An attempt has been made to study the women's educational status of the Bodo community of Assam, problem associated with it, the role of the Bodo women in economic activities and the way to uplift the rural economy of Assam through active participation of women by educationally empowering the women section of the community.

Meti (2013) reported that rearing of local poultry, local dairy and vermi-culture on small scale basis were the major agro based activities adopted by more than half of the farm women of Karnataka due to motivation through training and demonstration. Half of the respondents belonged to medium mass media utilization category. Low to medium achievement motivation was by possessed by more than 50% of the farm women because of illiteracy and ignorance. It was highlighted that, financial condition of majority (73.33%) of farm women was improved, followed by social and psychological status (58.33%) and increased level of confidence (61.66%) among farm women towards entrepreneurship are the major benefits derived after joining in SHG.

Borkakoty (2013) revealed that rural women of Golaghat district of Assam played a significant and crucial role in agriculture and allied activities. Cent per cent women were involved in operation like cutting, picking, drying of grains, cleaning of grains, storage and processing. The involvement of women in operation like cleaning of field, weeding, gap filling, shifting production to threshing floor, winnowing and in grading were above 75.00 per cent. Women participation varied between 50.00-75.00 per cent in operations like raising nursery, thinning and threshing. Women age and education were found to be the most important factors affecting participation of women negatively and significantly. Lack of proper training, lack of infrastructure etc. were also found to be other important factors.

3. Objectives of the study:

1. To study the economic status of women in Assam.
2. To study the relationship between women empowerment and human development of Assam and other North-Eastern States.

4. Database and Methodology:

The study is based on the secondary data collected from census data of 2011. Data on labour force, work force and education have been taken from National Sample Survey Office 68th Round, 2011-12. Data on health have been drawn from National Family Health Survey reports and Sample Registration System. To show the health status of males and females infant mortality rate has been taken as indicators of health. Human Development Report of North East States, 2011 has been used to show the relationship between human development and women empowerment among the north-east states by using correlation analysis.

5. Analysis:

Women status is determined to a great extent in terms of socio-economic indicators such as income, poverty, education and skills that opens up opportunities of employment and better health. At the same time, women must have a share in the decision making process in the family and in the public sphere and access the rights and opportunities provided by the state and society at large.

5.1.: Status of Women Economic Empowerment in Assam:

Women are generally economically dependent and backward. Economic independence, through very essential is not alone sufficient to give women the strength needed to face the battle. Even economically independent women have to depend on their parents or husbands or relatives for shelter. There are misconceptions that they are not economically contributors. Female work participation is another indicator of women's status in the society. Assam is not the worst among major states of the Indian Union in terms of human development and

gender equality but it ranks quite low. Assam has a largely rural agrarian economy, which is characterized by high rate of work participation of women. Though Female Work Participation Rates (FWPR) are high, as it is subsistence farming, women do not benefit economically, though they share a disproportionate share of the work burden. The work participation rate of the women in Assam is considerably lower than that of men in general except in the primary sector where the rates are in favour of women. The participation of women in the secondary and tertiary sectors is lower in Assam. According to Economic survey, Assam 2009-10, women constitute 32.5 percent of all organised sector workers, as opposed to only 19 percent for all India in the same sector. Interestingly, since 1990's women's employment in the organised sector has been approximately around 30 percent where majorities of women employed in this sector are employed by Tea Industry which is one of the largest organised sectors in Assam, either as permanent/ temporary/ casual labour.

The following table 1.1 shows the male-female work participation rates in Assam with comparison to India.

Table 1: Work Force Participation Rate in Assam and India (%)

State	Rural			Urban			Combined		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Assam	53.1	23.7	38.7	56.79	14.9	36.41	53.59	22.46	38.36
India	53	30	41.8	53.76	15.4	35.31	53.26	25.51	39.79

Source: Census 2011 data, Office of the Registrar General, India

There exists a massive gender inequality as far as employment status is concerned. Table 1 represents low work force participation rates of women compared to men in both Assam and India. It shows a sharp unequal distribution of employment between men and women, women experiencing low work force participation rate. In comparison to Assam, the female workforce participation of India is slightly better.

The table 2 highlights the size of unemployment as percentage of labour force. It shows unemployment rates of both male and female in rural and urban areas of Assam and India. From the table it can be stated that unemployment rates are higher for female compared to male. This gender inequality in unemployment rates is more pronounced in rural areas of Assam.

Table 2: Female Unemployment Rates of Assam and India

State/India	Rural			Urban		
	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total
Assam	9.2	4.4	5.0	7.5	5.4	5.7
India	2.9	2.1	2.3	6.6	3.2	3.8

Source: National Sample Survey office, 68th Round, July 2011-June 2012

The table 3 highlights the size of unemployment per thousand males and females in rural and urban areas for both Assam and India. From the table it can be stated that unemployment rates are higher for female compared to male. This gender inequality in unemployment rates is more pronounced in urban areas of both Assam and India. The intensity of unemployment for females is more in Assam in comparison to India.

Table 3: Female Unemployment Rate (per 1000) aged 15 years and above in Assam

State/ India	Rural		Urban		Total	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Assam	18	53	15	120	18	58
India	27	34	35	108	29	49

Source: National Sample Survey Office, 68th Round, July 2011 - June 2012

Table 4 represents worker population ratio of per thousand males and females in both rural and urban areas of Assam and India. It witnessed very poor worker population ratio of women compare to men. This inequality in worker population ration is more reflective in urban areas as compared to rural areas of both Assam and India.

Table 4: Worker Population Ratio of Males and Females (per 1000)

State/ India	Rural		Urban		Total	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
Assam	363	833	180	762	339	823
India	351	743	175	714	296	735

Source: National Sample Survey Office, 68th Round, July 2011 - June 2012

Table 5: Average Wage/Salary (in Rs.) received per day by Regular/Salaried Employee

State/ India	Rural		Urban	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
Assam	179.71	343.97	561.63	615.23
India	201.56	322.2	366.15	469.87

Source: National Sample Survey Office, 68th Round, July 2011 - June 2012

Table 5 shows gender differences in per day wage of both rural and urban areas in North-East India. On the basis of the above table it can be stated that wage differences exists between male and female workers of the region. Per day wage of women is much lower than men in rural areas of Assam and India. But in case of urban areas, females are getting higher wage than men in Assam as compared to India.

Women Empowerment and Human Development: Interlinkages

Women are said to be empowered when they have control upon their own lives, which enable their increased capacity for leading a fulfilling human life. Empowered women can contribute to human development by household and community activities. When women have greater control over resources, better education and health status not only her family but also the entire society develops. Studies have found that high level of women empowerment is both a necessary and sufficient condition for improved level of human development. Let us analyze whether inputs to women empowerment have any significant link with the human development.

Education: Education is one of the key factors that enable women empowerment. Education enhances the social status of a woman and is invariably linked with her economic status. Countries committed to universal primary education for boys and girls have been far more successful in escaping poverty and recording high rate of growth and socio-economic development (Sharma, 2008). Educational attainment is one of the components of composite index of human development. So empowering women through education automatically enhances human development. Table 6 reveals that there exists a significant positive relationship between female literacy and over all human development in the state. Thus there is a need to take more steps on the part of the government to ensure higher female literacy which would lead to higher human development.

Table 6: Female Literacy and Human Development Index (HDI)

State	Female Literacy	HDI	Correlation Coefficient
Assam	67.3	.364	r=0.65 (Significant at 5%)
Arunachal Pradesh	59.7	.427	
Nagaland	76.7	.570	
Manipur	73.2	.521	
Mizoram	89.4	.584	
Tripura	83.1	.447	
Meghalaya	73.8	.455	

Source: Human Development Report of North-East States, 2011.

Demographic status: Health and demographic status are very important inputs to women empowerment. Improved health and demographic status of women implies less maternal mortality, less infant mortality, reduced malnutrition and improved sex ratio etc. Empowered women are more conscious about their own health and nutritional status as well as that of their children which in turn enhance human development. Let us now analyze whether there is any link between sex ratio and infant mortality rate as indicators of women empowerment and human development. Table 7 reveals that there is a positive relationship between se ratio and human development. However, this relationship is not statistically significant. On the other hand, there is a negative relationship between infant mortality rate of females and human development but this relationship is not significant.

Table 7: Sex Ratio and Human Development Index (HDI)

State	Sex Ratio	HDI	Correlation Coefficient
Assam	954	.364	r=0.4 (Not Significant)
Arunachal Pradesh	920	.427	
Nagaland	931	.570	
Manipur	987	.521	
Mizoram	975	.584	
Tripura	961	.447	
Meghalaya	986	.455	

Source: Human Development Report of North-East States, 2011

Table 8: Infant Mortality Rate for Females and Human Development Index

State	IMR	HDI	Correlation Coefficient
Assam	56	.364	r=-0.429 (Significant at 10%)
Arunachal Pradesh	31	.427	
Nagaland	26	.570	
Manipur	15	.521	
Mizoram	37	.584	
Tripura	29	.447	
Meghalaya	52	.455	

Source: Human Development Report of North-East States, 2011

Economic Participation of females: Economic independence is one of the important inputs of women empowerment which enhances human development. When women have better control over resources, they utilize it more rationally in productive uses as compared to men. When they have control over their own income their confidence and self esteem increases and they participate in decision making process both in households and at the level of community. If women along with men are economically sound, they can lead a decent living and their choices and wishes are more likely to be fulfilled. Around the globe almost half of the population is women. They contribute two thirds of world's working hours but they receive only one tenth of world's income and own only one percent of world's wealth. This is because most of women's work remains unpaid and what is worse is unrecognized (Rajasi Clerk, 2003). Women are the worst victim of poverty. So when women are empowered their access to and control over resources increases which in turn leads to reduction of poverty. World Bank also emphasized the importance of women empowerment as an effective weapon of poverty elimination and for promotion of sustainable development. As regards let us examine whether there exist any link between female work participation rate and human development in Assam. Correlation analysis reveals that the female work force participation and human development are strongly associated (Table 9). This may be due to significant role of women in controlling over their earned income in terms of its spending.

Table 9: Female Work Force Participation Rates and Human Development Index

State	FWPR	HDI	Correlation Coefficient
Assam	22.46	.364	r=0.79 (Significant at 1%)
Arunachal Pradesh	35.44	.427	
Nagaland	44.74	.570	
Manipur	38.56	.521	
Mizoram	36.16	.584	
Tripura	23.57	.447	
Meghalaya	32.67	.455	

Source: National Sample Survey office, 68th Round, July 2011-June 2012

Suggestions:

Government should take appropriate steps with the participation of masses in order to bring the girl child to the main stream of education, health and economic participation. The policies which are designed should go hand in hand. Every woman related issues are important to consider by increasing their collective power.

- ❖ The parents of girl child belonging to poor families must be specially educated to understand the importance of education for their girl child as base for women empowerment.
- ❖ To construct consciousness concerning rights and responsibilities relating to laws governing to women's status in the society.
- ❖ To help women to achieve financial feasibility through literacy.
- ❖ The implementation at the ground level needs to be strengthening and the research gaps needs to be identified so that utmost women can contribute.
- ❖ Societal attention ought to be given to women in the complicated and difficult circumstances like domestic violence, social discrimination, early marriage, dowry etc.
- ❖ Building a constructive image of women in the society and recognizing their contribution in social, economic and political sphere.
- ❖ The feedback system should be made compulsory so that timely responses and the opinion of the women can help in improving the status.
- ❖ Revolving funds can be helpful for the microenterprise development.

6. Conclusion

Education is the only answer for all round development of women. After going through this discussion it can be understood that women empowerment is a tool for development. They must change the patriarchal attributes and the ideology of subordination of men towards them. Women should be educated to comprehend that they require a change for the betterment of themselves. To empower women in all spheres, efforts have to be taken to break the old mythology about women's helplessness, lack of drive and enthusiasm in order to reach the heights of credit. The change of mindset for both male and female is necessary. Only government will not be able to achieve the target of women empowerment and human development. Many policies have been introduced by the government but still there is a gap which needs to be fulfilled. Especially in the backwards areas like Assam Nongovernmental Organization(NGO) and the Self Help Group(SHG) should be strengthen so that majority of women can take the benefits out of it. The collective support will facilitate in the progress and growth. Hence it is significant to provide women with nurturing support and supervision to become progressive achieve peaceful life and secured future and greater human development.

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