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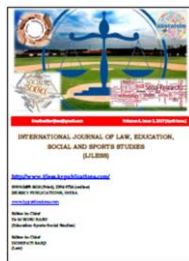


Employability for Women in Assam: An analysis

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ABSTRACT

The 20th century saw radical shifts in the roles and expectations of women in society. This article is the views of the year 2000-2016 on Employability for Women in Assam. The present paper is an attempt to analyze the status of women and their empowerment in terms of various indicators such as access to education, employment, household decision making power, financial autonomy, freedom of movement, exposure to media, political participation, experience of domestic violence etc in the state of Assam using secondary data obtained from various sources. The study reveals that development process in the state is not gender neutral; women enjoy quite inferior status as compared to the average women in India. Percentage of women in the government services and their political participation is quite low and does not show any sign of significant improvement. Sex ratio though not in favor of women is improving over time. Women enjoy better status in the state as compared to women in India in terms of decision making power at the household level while the situation is reverse in case of their financial autonomy and sexual violence. Inter district disparity is rampant in the state. Higher the literacy higher is the female workforce participation rate. Female enrolment rate is below fifty per cent in spite of universalisation of primary education and provision of mid day meal schemes. The study concludes that while great strides have been made in changing attitudes towards gender equality, there is still a long way to go before equal opportunities are really achieved.

Key words: Employability, Empowerment, Universalisation

Introduction

The last century saw radical shifts in the roles and expectations of women in Indian society. At the beginning of the twentieth century, women were very much seen as second-class citizens, not worthy of a vote in general elections. The worlds of politics, the law, science, medicine, business and higher education were seen as male realms and opportunities available to women were severely limited. Working class women could expect to be servants or factory workers, and middle class women were expected to focus on marriage and motherhood.

Assam is one of the eight states of North East India. It is the largest state in the Region in terms of population and second to Arunachal Pradesh in geographical area. In spite of her rich natural

resources and culture the state is lagging behind the rest of the country. The socioeconomic set up of the state has not been conducive to overall development. Since it is a multiethnic state with heterogeneous cultural backgrounds, it has been experiencing insurgency and ethnic strife for the last three decades because of which not only its economy but also the social fabric is under threat. The worst victims in the process are the women.

Though the entire Region including Assam is free from some of the social evils like dowry, sati pratha, female feticide and infanticide because of the prevalence of tribal and indigenous culture, other forms of gender discrimination do exist as revealed in various gender gap studies. It is contrary to the general perception that women of Assam are as disadvantaged as the women in rest of the country. In certain respects the position of women in Assam is weaker than that in other states of the country. Study of Shivkumar (1996) on differential gender attainment of 16 major Indian states ranked Assam in the 10th position. (2002) reported higher gender inequality in the state as compared to all India situations. The state got 29th rank among the 32 States and Union Territories in the country. According to Assam Human Development Report (2003), the state lagged behind Manipur, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Nagaland. Keeping these points in view it was thought to undertake an in-depth study on the status of women and their role of the family in the states.

In contrast, in the year 2000, work has become a much more central feature of women's lives, with women making up almost half the workforce at the beginning of the twenty-first century. It is questionable whether this is, indeed, an indication of equality, since women have tended to enter the workforce in lower status, lower paid jobs (Heath, 1996). While the landmark decision to give all women over the age of 21 the vote came as long as ago as 1928, the campaign for equal treatment and equal rights continues today, with the focus on equal pay for equivalent work and on equalizing the gender balance in positions of authority (Equal Opportunities Commission, 2000).

Methodology

The research is located in Assam—however, we believe that it is of relevance across the India, since cultural expectations of women and men are similar north and south of the border and similar trends in educational attainment are evident in all parts of the India. In order to examine the Employability for Women in Assam we have used secondary data from different sources at the disaggregate level.

Analysis has been made by putting them into four categories on the basis of (1) employment (2) education (3) demography and (4) political participation across different district groups categorized on the basis of geographical location, level of literacy and district domestic product. As regards geographical location, the state is divided into three areas, namely Lower Assam (Barpeta, Bongaigoan, Dhubri, Goalpara, Kamrup, Kokrajhar and Nalbari), Central Assam (Cachar, Darrang, Hailakandi, Karbi Anglong, Karimganj, Morigoan, Nagaon, N.C. Hills and Sonitpur) and Upper Assam (Dhemaji, Dibrugarh, Golaghat, Jorhat, Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Tinsukia). The districts are also grouped on the basis of literacy, namely Low Literacy districts (below 50%: Dhubri), Moderate Literacy districts (50-60%: Bongaigoan, Barpeta, Darrang, Goalpara, Hailakandi, Karbi Anglong, Morigoan and Kokrajhar), High Literacy districts (60-70%: Bongaigoan, Cachar, Dhemaji, Dibrugarh, Golaghat, Karimganj, Nagoan, Lakhimpur, Nalbari, N.C. Hills, Sonitpur and Tinsukia) and Higher Literacy districts (above 70%: Jorhat, Kamrup and Sibsagar).

Employment Status: The young people agreed, in principle, with equal opportunities, views of equality were tempered by what they saw around them in their own families and in the workplace. For example, while they believed that bringing up children was a joint responsibility, they were aware that this was most often done by women. They also saw that men tended to have higher status, higher paid jobs and about one-fifth of the boys retained the idea that the man should be the main

breadwinner. Both girls and boys believed that women may have more difficulty getting jobs because employers would be expecting that they would get pregnant and leave at some point.

To analyze the status of women on the basis of their employment status, we have considered in this section percentage distribution of workers, workforce participation rate, and formation of SHGs across different district groups in the state.

Let us have a look on the percentage of main, marginal and non workers belonging to both the sexes in respect of Assam in 2001 on the basis of geographical location. In case of main workers, percentage of females is much lower than that of males irrespective of districts whereas more females are engaged as marginal and non workers as compared to male counterparts. This shows the relative disadvantage of women in the state in respect of employment. From the table it is also clear that all the Upper Assam districts have higher proportion of female main and marginal workers and relatively lower proportion of female non workers. The districts in Central and Lower Assam exhibit almost same pattern of having low proportion of female main and marginal workers and high proportion of female non-workers.

Data further reveal that there is a positive relationship between overall literacy rate and percentage of female main workers. Dhubri, the low literacy rate district, shows highest proportion of female non workers (91.96%) and lowest proportion of female main workers (4.27%) and marginal workers (3.85%). High Literacy rate districts are having highest proportion of female main and marginal workers and lowest proportion of female non workers. It is important to note that proportion of main workers is relatively high and non workers and marginal workers are low among male population which is not true in case of female population.

Women's awareness about micro credit programme and formation of women Self Help Groups also indicate women's effort for economic emancipation and employment status. It is seen that 61 per cent of total SHGs formed from 1999 to 2006 were women SHGs which was reduced to 5.19 per cent during 2006-07 in the state. Percentage of Women SHGs to total SHGs from 1999 to 2006 was observed to be highest in Upper Assam (68%). Central and Lower Assam showed poor performance as compared to Upper Assam in this respect. On an average Central Assam districts had highest number of SHGs formed since 1999 followed by Lower Assam and Upper Assam. Average number of women SHGs taking up economic activity during 2006-07 was much lower in Upper Assam as compared to Lower Assam and Central Assam. It was highest in Central Assam.

With the increase in literacy the percentage of women SHGs to total SHGs formed from 1999 up till 2006 increases significantly. As an exceptional case, highest number of SHGs was formed in the Low Literacy district, Dhubri. The number of women SHGs taken up economic activity was also the highest in this Low Literacy district.

The educational attainment of women of Assam at district level can be analyzed through female literacy rate and female enrolment rate at different stages of education. All the Upper Assam districts have high female literacy above state average except Tinisukia. Female literacy rate is highest in Upper Assam (60.35%) which is quite higher than state average (54.61%). Central Assam and Lower Assam show almost same performance in the field of female literacy rate which is far below Upper Assam. These rates are 52.61 per cent and 52.53 per cent respectively. Similar pattern is also observed in case of total literacy. Now let us analyze the pattern of female literacy across the groups when classification of districts is made on the basis of total literacy. Female literacy rate increases across the districts along with the increase in total literacy rate. If we examine the table we find that it is lowest (40.04%) in Low Literacy district and highest (66.91%) in Higher Literacy districts. Wide variation in

female literacy rate is seen across the districts which range from as low as 40 per cent to as high as 68 per cent.

Let us now examine the proportion of female enrolment in different stages of education on the basis of our previous classification of districts. District wise enrolment of females by stages of education gives an insight about the educational status of women in the state. The information presented in Table 8 tells us that enrolment is highest in primary level, slightly lower in middle level. The proportion of enrolment decreases with the increase in the stages of education. In almost all the districts, in primary level, enrolment rate is almost fifty per cent. In middle and high school level also the percentage of enrolment is around 45%. However in higher secondary and junior colleges the female enrolment is much lower i.e. below 40%. Female enrolment in primary level in the three regions -Lower, Central and Upper Assam are almost equal i.e. around 49-50 per cent. In middle level, enrolment rate is slightly lower in Lower Assam in comparison to Upper and Central Assam. Enrolment rate at high school level is much higher in Upper Assam (46.52%) as compared to Lower Assam (42.53%) and Central Assam (43.47%). Female enrolments at higher secondary and at junior college are also significantly higher in Upper Assam than in Lower and Central Assam. The corresponding figures for higher secondary and Junior College are around 41 per cent and 43 per cent in Upper Assam as compared to 33 per cent and 38 per cent in Lower Assam and 37 per cent and 39 per cent in Central Assam.

At pre primary and middle level the rate of enrolments are almost similar for all the district groups based on literacy rates. However in higher level it varies positively with literacy. High School enrolment rate is comparatively lower (40%) in Low Literacy district and almost same (44% approximately) for moderate, high and higher literacy districts. Enrolment in higher secondary level is highest in Moderate Literacy districts (38.69%). It is lowest (30.46%) in Low Literacy districts and in all the groups it is much lower than pre primary and middle level enrolment. Since enrolment rate is decreasing with the level of education, it can safely be concluded that high drop out of girl students is associated with higher level of education. If we see the enrolment rate at junior colleges we find that it is highest in Higher Literacy district (41%), almost same for Moderate and High Literacy district and lowest in Low Literacy district (29%). Demographic Status Sex ratio is one of the important demographic factors that indicate the status of women in a particular society. A social system with higher sex ratio itself shows the higher status of women.

The sex ratio of Assam is estimated to be 935, which is slightly higher than all India average of 933. When it has increased in the state from 925 in 1991 to 935 in 2001, it has shown a declining trend at the all India level during the same period. For the state of Assam it is indeed a positive development. Let us examine the pattern of variation of sex ratio. Central Assam has the highest sex ratio and is higher than that of the state average for both the periods followed by Lower Assam and Upper Assam. Table further shows that sex ratios decrease with the increase in the literacy rate which is in fact a disturbing trend in a developing society. It is observed to be highest in Low Literacy district and lowest in Higher Literacy districts. Status of Political Participation Women's political participation is another input to their empowerment. It is one of the important factors that contribute to their well being. Empowered women have political freedom which in turn translates into their decision making capacity both at the community and national level. Women's representation in political field even in its most modest form of local government has the ability to transform and reinterpret the practice of politics.

It helps to create better village communities based on harmony and cooperation achieved through gender balance and justice. However, measurement of women's political empowerment through their political participation in the context of India and her constituent states including Assam poses

sometimes doubts on the efficacy of the empowerment variable. This is because of the fact that strong family-based structure of Indian politics makes it difficult for women to assert independent political choices, as distinct from the male headed families. Therefore, judging women's political agency on the basis of their representation in political bodies is hazardous; women standing proxy for men are quite common in India. In the absence of any other alternative we had to depend on indicator like elected women Members in Legislative Assembly in Assam from 1972 to 2006. When we analyze the percentage of contestants and winners across districts and areas we observe some degree of disparities. Though percentage of voters across districts does not vary much but gender gap is observed in this respect.

Similarly we find that percentage of women contestants is high for higher literacy district and vice versa. However, percentage of winners among women varies positively along with literacy up to high level beyond which it shows a decline. It is worth mentioning that women in the low literacy districts did not win in the election. A Comparison between Assam and India National Family Health Survey - III pertains to data collected on various indicators of women empowerment. On the basis of these data the status of women both in Assam and India can best be understood. Various indicators like women's capacity of household decision making, their access and control over resources, acceptance of unequal gender role, media exposure, freedom of movement etc are the key to the process of women's empowerment. Decision making is the foremost step to the ladder of empowerment.

The percentage of total women in Assam who participate in all the four decisions like decision about own health care, major household purchases, visiting relatives or friends and making purchases for daily household needs are much better in Assam i.e. 60.5% as compared to 37% in all India level. In respect of each of the four decisions also, greater percentage of women in Assam are involved as compared to all India level. For instance only half of the total women in India have the ability to take decision like major household purchases as compared to almost three fourth in Assam.

Employment is an important indicator of empowerment. If we see the percentage of non workers in Assam and India we find that higher proportion of females are non workers in Assam as compared to India. But in urban areas the percentage of female non workers is almost same both in India and Assam. If we look at the rural urban divide we find that female non workers are more in urban areas as compared to rural areas both in Assam and India. As is obvious a wide gender gap is seen in this respect in the state. Workforce participation rate shows the number of persons employed per 1000 persons. Data for the year 2001 reveal that it is lower for Assam as compared to India as a whole. The rate is much lower in rural Assam (36.4%) as compared to rural India (42%). However the gap is narrower in case of urban areas, be it in India as a whole or in Assam. Further we find that it is lower for females both in absolute and relative terms. About half of the male population is engaged in workforce in Assam but in case of women, the rate is much lower, about a fifth are engaged in work. In rural areas, the rate is higher for women than that in urban Assam.

Women's access to monetary resource and credit is another important element of empowerment. Employment opportunity of women is necessary but not sufficient condition for financial empowerment. For economic empowerment control over resources is more important. In Assam, women have less financial autonomy as compared to all India level. Only 26.9% of total respondents in Assam take decisions by themselves about the use of their own earnings as compared to almost 50% in case of India. However, awareness about micro credit programme is slightly higher in Assam (41.7%) than in India (38.6%). Yet, an insignificant percentage of women have availed loan from micro credit programme both in India (4%) and Assam (1.4%) Another important evidence of empowerment of women is their attitude towards unequal gender role that prevails in the society. If women believe that wife beating is just or only male child should be given all the opportunities

including better education, nutrition etc and female child should be taught to make sacrifice from very childhood so that she would be a so called ideal woman then it indicates that women accept their subordinate status by themselves.

Conclusion

On the demand side, labor market discrimination against hiring women is also not uncommon, and surveys of employers have found that many employers openly express an explicit preference for hiring men over women. Thus from the above analysis it is quite clear that development process in the state is not gender neutral; women enjoy inferior status as compared to the average women in India. The percentage of women employees to total employees in the state in the Government services is low. There has not been any significant improvement in this regard in the last decade. As regards women's political participation it is found that percentage of women voters has always been less than that of male voters in all the years under study but the gender gap is not very significant. But percentage of women elected members is very less compared to male counterparts and has not been showing any sign of significant improvement. However gender gap existed in all the situations. Gender equality is considered a critical element in achieving social and institutional change that leads to sustainable development with equity and growth. Inequalities between men and women manifest themselves in all areas of development. Inequalities are most obvious in: health and education, economic development, violence against women, participation in public life and policymaking and social attitudes and gender stereotyping. In the areas of employment and education, most of the Upper Assam districts have performed well. Both Lower and Central Assam have low employment and educational status.

As regards sex ratio, it is not in favor of women; however it is improving over time. It is high both in Lower and Central Assam. Upper Assam has sex ratio which is far below the state average. Sex ratio shows a declining trend with the increase in literacy rate.

Women access and control over resources is far less in Assam in comparison to India. However awareness about micro credit programme is more in Assam than in India. Formation of SHGs from 1999 to 2006 is highest in Central Assam. However percentage of women SHGs to total SHGs is highest in Upper Assam during the same period.

Although Government has undertaken a number of steps the situation has remained gloomy mainly because the educated women are not forward looking and cherish the baseless age old customs. Thus there is a need to create awareness towards achieving the desired goal of employability of women in the state of Assam.

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