

Important Aspects of Women Empowerment in Assam and India

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Abstract

The present study is conducted on the important aspects of women empowerment in Assam and India. This study based on qualitative content analysis method. The information and data are collected from secondary sources like: printed books, journals, newspapers, periodicals, web sites and Ph.D. thesis etc. This paper highlights important aspects of women empowerment in Assam and India.

Keywords: Education; Literacy; Economic; Social; Women rights; Women empowerment

Introduction

All over the world, education is regarded as the key factor in overcoming the barriers that women face and the basic tool for empowering women and bringing them into the main path of development. Education not only provides basic knowledge and skills to improve health and livelihoods, but it empowers women to take their rightful place in society and the development process. Women constitute half of the population. It is in this context Mao Zedong rightly remarked “women hold up half the sky”.

Women are an integral part of every society. The status of women in the society is directly linked with social and cultural traditions, stages of economic development achieved, educational levels and political attainments for women in society. Women play a vital role in matriarchal society. Women play a decisive role in most of the patriarchal societies also. The future of the children depends by and large upon the mothers who generally stay at home and take care of their children's health and education. This is particularly so in countries like India where society and life of the people are moulded by traditional and spiritual foundations in family.

Though women are the key factor in the process of change and development, yet in many countries they are underestimated. In the world over it is now recognized that the status of women in society both in the developed and underdeveloped countries, continues to be inferior to men. Although women's role is crucial in the family and household economy, women have not been given equal rights in social, political as well as in economic fields. The necessity of the improvement of the status of women has now been recognized all over the world as an important aspect of national progress and development.

Meaning of Women Empowerment

Empowerment as a concept was introduced at the International Women's Conference at Nairobi in 1985. The conference defined ‘empowerment’ as a redistribution of social, power and control of resource in favour of women. Women empowerment is a global issue and discussions on women's right are at the forefront of many formal information campaigns worldwide. Empowerment has become one of the most widely used developmental terms. Empowerment is a multi-faceted, multi-dimensional and multi layered concept. It is a complicated and uphill task Development of individuality is the basic concern of empowerment process [1].

Empowerment in its simplest form means the manifestation of redistribution of power that challenges patriarchal ideology and the

male dominance. It is both a process and the result of the process. It is transformation of the structures or institutions that reinforce and perpetuates gender discrimination. It is a process that enables women to gain access to and control of material as well as information resources. The concept of women's empowerment, throughout the world, has its roots in women's movements.

Women empowerment is a process in which women gain greater share of control over resources, materials human and intellectual like knowledge, information, ideas and financial resources like money and access to money and control over decision making in the home, community, society and nation, and to gain ‘power’. According to the report of Government of India, “Empowerment means moving from a position of enforced powerlessness to one of power”.

Review of Related Literature

Saikia A in her study on “Economic Status of Women in the Rural Areas of Assam” has mentioned that employment and income opportunities can be stated in the following sectors:

(i) Agriculture

Major emphasis should be placed on expansion of productive work opportunities in agriculture for females who are engaged in this sector. Intensive utilization of agricultural land through adoption of double and multiple cropping practices would lead to higher utilization of labour force in the farm and shorten periods of seasonal unemployment in agriculture. With limited possibility of expansion of net area under cultivation, additional work opportunities can be created through modifications in the farming system, production techniques and cropping pattern.

(ii) Allied agricultural activities

Allied agricultural activities particularly livestock farming and animal husbandry have very good scope for enhancing productive work opportunities in rural areas if these are developed on scientific

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and commercial basis. Through better training, financial assistance, provision of marketing facilities, rural women can be encouraged to take up these activities.

(iii) Agro based and small scale industries

Demand based and resource based small scale enterprises can be set up in rural areas. Emphasis should be placed on preservation and development of local talents and traits. Training of females in changes in designs and tests of consumers would be necessary.

(iv) Handloom and weaving

The most important household industry carried out by the females in all rural households in Assam is handloom weaving. In order to increase prospects of employment and income for females in handloom weaving and to raise quality and quantity of handloom products some basic facilities should be provided. These are (i) supply of yarn at subsidized rates through village level cooperative societies, (ii) Provision of financial facilities to female weavers, (iii) supply of fly shuttle looms through village level organizations, (iv) Provision of marketing facilities, (v) training of Weavers in improved designs according to change in consumer taste.

(v) Sericulture

Resources should be taken to develop Endi, Muga and Silk industry on commercial basis. Endi is one important household industry for females in rural areas while Muga and Silk industry are found in selected areas. As the demand for various products made from Endi, Muga and Silk are increasing, such industries should be revived by providing credit and marketing facilities and also technological guidance.

(vi) Food processing industries

Food processing industries are virtually non-existent in rural areas of Assam. Development of food preservation, processing, earning units can be taken up on the basis of locally available fruits in the region. Jelly, fruit juice, pickles have good demand in urban areas and the greater portion of this demand is met from supplies of outside Assam. Moreover, rural females can take up preparation of various types of rice products on commercial basis with a linkage to nearby urban centres for marketing.

(vii) Tailoring, embroidery, knitting etc.

Centres for training rural females in tailoring embroidery, knitting works should be started in rural areas covering a few villages. Demand for such services is increasing in rural areas because change in consumer taste. Females can take initiative to open such units in rural areas either individually or collectively.

The study conducted recommended that the basic requirements for success of an employment policy are-Firstly the identification of the groups of women who are in actual need of employment and income in rural areas; and secondly the farming out of suitable and practical employment generating schemes. Training facilities for rural females should be provided and they should be encouraged to take up self-employment schemes. The rural females should be brought to participate into the mainstream of development activities and this would necessitate extension of education and training facilities in rural areas (status of women in Assam, Page 30-32).

Stein in the book on 'Empowerment and Women's Health', tried to focus on how aspects of social organization, as reflected in women's status and education, affect women in particular and how empowerment, at societal and individual level took to reduce inequalities and develop

power; is linked to health. It is clearly mentioned in the chapter on 'Equality, Education and Empowerment' that women's education is one of the winners in the production of health contest. If societies could or would put the necessary resources into educating women, many other determinants could be positively affected.

Saikia [2] in his study "Women Empowerment and Self Help Groups" has found that regular small savings by members to develop common fund, democratic and decentralized operation, easy, immediate and need based access to loans on lower interest rates than money lenders, timely and high rate of loan recovery due to group pressure, relationship of trust and confidence between bankers and the rural poor and consequent preference of banks to SHGs over individuals for granting loans that promote banking behavior among rural and marginalized population are some of the strengths of SHGs that may really help the cause of women empowerment.

Archana [3] in her study on 'Impact of Economic Development of Women: With Particular Reference to Assam' mentioned that the occupational distribution among women employees in the public sector shows that the highest percentage of women employees are engaged in professional and technical jobs, followed by primary and middle school teaching, unskilled works and clerical and related works. Even in the occupation where the female work participation rate is highest employment ratio is approximately only 12 per 100 men. Most of these women are again employed in institutions for general education. In 1986-87, the total number of female teachers in the colleges for professional and other education was only 135 against 897 men. Thus, she concluded that the women in the employment market particularly in the better paid occupations are lesser than men. Large scale illiteracy among the female population is one of the major causes of this low participation rate. The findings of the study are:

1. The sex ration in the state is declining over the time
2. The sex ratio is higher in the rural based districts
3. Female work participation rate is higher in the primary sector, but as a whole the sex ratio is very low in all the sectors except manufacturing in household industries
4. The female work participation rate is extremely low in construction, transport and communication hence the share of women in the state income is also lower
5. The growth of employment is higher in the public sector but women are getting comparatively more employment in the private sector
6. Literacy plays an important role in female work participation ratio
7. Educational level and technical education increases occupational mobility between industries. Occupational mobility both within and between industries is very low for women in the state because of low educational level and low technical skill
8. A large number of women workers in the state are in the unorganized sectors whose plight is worse than the limited few working in the organized sector.

In the study "Empowerment of Women in North East" which was done by Saikia [2] and Kumar [4], it is found that according to the United Nation Human Development Report, 2004, women work on average more than men, when both paid employment and unpaid

household tasks are concerned. In rural areas of the developing countries surveyed, women perform an average of 20 percent more work than men. Women earn 10 percent of the world's income and own only one percent of the world's wealth-despite making up 49.5 percent of the population. In India also, women comprise merely half of the national population of our country, i.e. 933 females per 1000 male in 2001 (940 females per 1000 males in 2011). Hence the development of the country is inescapably linked with the status of development of women. He has mentioned that although women in the country constitute the majority of the total population i.e. 495.74 million representing 48.3 percent of the total population in the country and almost similar percentage of women in the North East Women are yet contribute to their full potential to the entrepreneurial world at large. Therefore, in the interest of long term development it is a necessity that they are empowered.

Methods of the Study

This study based on qualitative content analysis method using documents. The information and data are collected from secondary sources like: printed books, journals, newspapers, periodicals, web sites and Ph.D. thesis.

Discussion of Important Aspects of Women Empowerment

There are many aspects of empowering women. Some important indicators in this direction are discussed in the following sections:

Education and empowerment

Education is a process of complete moral orientation. Education of women is the foremost requirement in improving the status of women in the society. An educated woman can face the vagaries of life without any fear. Education creates modern outlook among women which in turn strengthens their claim for better status in the society. Because lack of education implies lack of awareness about their own rights and privileges' which ultimately becomes a factor in deteriorating their social status. Education is the only medium through which the image of a girl child as a second class citizen can be removed [3].

Inequality between men and women is one of the most crucial and yet one of the most persistent disparities in most societies. Difference in male and female literacy rates are one aspect of this broader phenomenon of gender based inequality in India. While about 75.85 percent of males in the country were literate in 2001, the land mark of 50 percent has still not been achieved for females. For ages women in India have been subjected to varying degrees of social discrimination and economic exploitation. The most common form of disparity is that the female is confined to the traditionally ascribed roles assigned by males within the four walls of the house. She is subjected to prejudices in an orthodox milieu and has to be content with a secondary place in the society. The exploitation is not limited only to the homes or to the family, but extends well beyond these frontiers.

Gender inequality in education, depriving women the right to education was inbuilt into the social system very early in the history of our country, as early as later vedic age. The purdah system during the medieval era further distanced women from education, though it did not ban it completely. The advent of British and the social reform movements started within its rule did lay some emphasis on female education, but this was more or less confined to the urban society.

One of the most important components of a developed society is education and it plays an important role in empowering women, i.e.

in strengthening the status and rights of women as human beings. Empowerment of women is vital component of human resource development all over the world. Progress of any society is largely dependent upon the condition of women in the society. In recent years empowerment of women is recognized as the central issue in determining the status of women. Empowerment of women involves enabling women to hold legitimate position of authority and to influence others. In our society women constitute the marginalized section. So empowering women implies, enabling them to find ways so that they are able to fight with the imbalances in the society and thereby participate equally in the on-going process of development.

Empowerment of women can take place only in an atmosphere of 'give and take' attitude and partnership accord. Empowerment can be brought about in a sustainable manner through human development of which education would be a prominent component. The correlation between human development and empowerment needs to be appreciated in order to plan and promote education among women.

It is argued that education is a powerful tool in the emancipation and empowerment of women. Indeed, the different organs of the United Nations (e.g. UNICEF and UNESCO) and experts on women's liberation argue for women's education as the basic step in women's equality. It is only through the education of women that we can expect better atmosphere at homes, better hygienic condition, greater production, greater reduction in fertility rate and happier family life.

Education not only helps women to gain knowledge but also provides the necessary courage and inner strength to face the challenges of life. It has enabled them to procure a job and supplement the income of the family and achieve social status.

Education conceived as organized institution is part of the development process. Theoretically, education must enable persons to acquire knowledge and necessary skills. This knowledge and skills should further enable them to compete for and acquire better occupational status or higher social status in life. Thus education should lead to social, economic productivity of the individual and as a corollary of the society. Education for women in particular is one of the essential tools not only for ensuring gender equality but also in the process of empowering them so that women can fully contribute to society. Education of women will place them on an equal footing with men in decision making position in economic and political field. Empowerment of women through education will lead to their greater participation in government and community institution and better entrepreneurial opportunities.

Education is a prerequisite for progress and development upon which everything rest. Education gives people not just qualification to get jobs, but more importantly it creates opportunities and choices for people so that they are empowered in their lives. So, the first step towards empowering women is to educate women. It is only through a good quality education designed on the basis of strategic needs of the women that the capacities of women could be built so that they are able to avail the opportunities in public as well as in private life. Education is the corner stone of women's empowerment because it enables them to respond to opportunities and challenges and thereby change their lives. It also helps to change some of the societal attitude and behaviours towards women.

Education not only helps a woman to know the meaning of life at her individual level but also makes her socially more relevant. Dispelling the darkness of ignorance from one's life it empowers her to live every moment meaningfully and over exploring new possibilities

of life, which seems impossible without education. Educating women benefits the whole of society and many a time it has more significant impact on development process. Education has been regarded as the most significant instrument for changing women's subjugated position in the society. It not only develops the personality and relationally of individuals, but qualifies them to fulfil certain economic, political and cultural functions and thereby improves their socio-economic status.

In the programme of action of the International Conference on Population and Development, education is considered one of the most important means to empower women with the knowledge, skills and self-confidence necessary to participate fully in development process. Educated women marry later want fewer children, are more likely to use effective method of contraception and have greater means to improve their economic livelihood along with their health.

To improve access to education for girls and women and remove every obstacle that hampers their active participation, the priority actions should include the elimination of social and cultural barriers and also provide opportunities to take the benefits of regular education programmes.

Empowering women itself is a multidimensional problem and an issue of global concern. It has economic, political, technological and above all social dimensions. Women need education that empowers them with basic knowledge, skill and attitude. An educated woman will develop insight into sensitive treatment of women, providing respectful behaviour as well as encouragement of women's participation in decision making. In a world where socio-economic development becomes more intensive the role of education in empowering women becomes all the more crucial. Education should be made a catalytic force in changing the societal attitudes towards women. Thus, the entire education system should be revitalized and restructured so that it can awaken the divine in women by making an all-round development of body, mind and soul of the women as human beings and thus bring development and happiness to our society [3].

So, the role of education should be viewed as improving the efficiency of women as wives and mothers and strengthen the hold of traditional values on society. Another purpose of education of women is to fill the wide gulf created by the changing socio-cultural context between man and woman which created difficulties in social and family structure. Women could be empowered through education, information sharing and training, so that they realize their collective strength. This collective strength would be used to change the social situations to the benefit of women.

Education for a long time was dissociated from the idea of nation building. Its main aim was considered to be transmission of the accumulated wealth of knowledge, impart the classical values and to build the character of the individual. It was not viewed as a contributory factor to the development of the nation's we understand it today. Though, views changed later, but women were not allowed to take up vocational education. For the first time the UNESCO conference in 1962 underlined the importance of the access of girls and women to technical and vocational education for economic and social development.

The government of India's national policy of education pin its hope to this strategy. It is indisputable that education enables a woman to gain more knowledge about the world outside her hearth and home, increase her skills, and helps her to get status giving employment all of which will develop her personality, positive self-image and self-confidence. Even so these attributes will remain personal to her and

cannot be transferred to her status. The fact is that education by itself will not contribute to social status of woman. Education will not be able to deliver the goods unless it fosters new values which exposes the inequalities against women and gender justice.

In the modern context women are participating in large number in medicine, engineering and management and are exhibiting to the world that they could play an equally important role as men in the nation building. Thus, there is no denying the fact that education empowers women. We know that there is link between women's education and national development through the reduction of fertility rates, the improvement in investment, enhancement of developmental process, increased productivity levels, and developing of permanent positive impact on the economy. Education has come as an enlivening and empowering agent for women and all other weaker sections of the society and the revolutionizing power of education has been accepted as such by the nation builders and policy makers of India. The New National Policy on Education (1986) a document that came into being in order to give focus and purpose to education in the country, pledges to take up women empowerment as a national cause.

Education is perhaps the single most important instrument through which a human resource can be fully developed. It is very well said that knowledge is power. Education enables people to acquire basic skills and inculcates abilities which are helpful in raising the social and economic status of the person. Women education has assumed special significance in the context of planned development because the efforts of planned development are to bring all those in the mainstream who are left outside for some reason or the other. As an outcome of the report of the committee on the status of women in India, education was included in Sixth Five Year plan as a major programme for the development of women.

So, it is clear that education to women is the most powerful instrument of changing their position in the society and also brings about reduction in inequalities and also acts as a means to improve their status within the family. In order to encourage education of women at all levels and to dilute gender bias in the provision separate schools, colleges and even universities were established exclusively for women in the country. To bring more girl children, especially from marginalized families, into main stream of education, government has been providing a package of concession in the form of free supply of books, uniforms, boarding and lodging, clothing for hostellers, mid-day meals, scholarship, free bicycles and so on.

The mother Teresa Women University has been established for the development women studies and to encourage higher education among women and their social mobility.

A literate woman is a sure sign of education of coming generation because a literate woman never tolerates illiteracy in the house. That is why Pundit Jawaharlal Nehru rightly pointed out that if education is given to women then it would lead to education of home, society and the world at large Great social reforms have given foremost importance to female literacy for simple reason that the mother is the primary and the first teacher of the child. So the women should be awakened first and they should be trained to play an effective role in all walks of life

As women account for more than half of the world's illiterate population. Achieving literacy could be one of the first steps to empower women to participate more equally in society and free themselves from economic exploitation and oppression. Illiteracy on large scale is a major obstacle to development and condemns the battle against equality and empowerment of women.

Literacy and empowerment

Literacy is the stepping stone towards education. A man without literacy skill could be a good person but the same person with literacy skill could prove better and more functional. Literacy is a basic part of development process, an endeavour to improve the quality of life, building awareness among the disadvantaged sections, democratization of political power and to bridge the gap between rich and poor. Inequality between men and women is one of the most crucial and yet the most persistent disparities found in most studies. Difference in female and male literacy rates is one aspect of this broader phenomenon of gender based inequality in India.

Literacy is power and illiteracy is disability. According to 1991 census directives, “a person who can both read and write with understanding in any language is to be taken as literate. A person who can merely read but cannot write is not literate”. The literacy rates of Assam and India are shown in Table 1.

From above table it is seen that the literacy rates of Assam 1991, 2001 and 2011 are 53.42, 63.25 and 73.18. The male literacy rates for Assam in 1991, 2001 and 2011 are 61.30, 75.23 and 78.81 with the female literacy rates of 43.00, 51.85 and 67.27 respectively. The comparison further shows that the females are still lagging behind of their male counterparts in Assam.

It also seen that the India literacy rates for years 1991, 2001 and 2011 is 52.89, 61.87 and 43.03. The male literacy rates for India in 1991, 2001 and 2011 are 63.25, 71.28 and 54.61 with the female literacy rates of 74.04, 82.14 and 65.46 respectively.

Education holds the key to an improvement in position in society and is accepted as a passport to a better life. Therefore, it is strongly desired for any betterment of the society as a whole; ignorance and poverty go hand in hand a person is poor because he is ignorant and he is ignorant because he is poor. Only literacy has the power to break this vicious. According to Frank Lauback an American Missionary “Literacy is a tool to be used in everyday life; a tool to be constantly sharpened and perfected so that it becomes a person’s constant companion”. Thus, literacy is more than an end in itself. Obviously the most urgent priority is to ensure access to and improve the quality of learning particularly the education of girls and women community so that obstacles in the way of empowerment of weaker sections may be removed at any cost. Among the poorest, literacy has important ramifications in better employment opportunities, higher productivity in agricultural activities, better health status through reduction in child mortality rate and participatory role of women has enhanced the overall standard of living.

Literacy among women opens the possibility of unlimited exposure to new information and more importantly to new ways of thinking and new perspective on existing information. The literate women are able to constructively express their talent and give direction to their aptitudes. This enables them to lead a life which is more fulfilling and

satisfying. Literacy among women leads to better hygiene, improve nutrition practices and greater effectiveness in caring for family health and seeking timely medical intervention. This not only leads to better health status for the woman herself but at the same time lowers infant mortality. Better health status of women makes them more productive worker both at home and outside, leading a way to their equality and empowerment.

Literacy also leads to later age of marriage and smaller desired family size by enabling women to take decision to control their family. Literacy also helps the women to enhance their knowledge and release them from continuous child rearing and child bearing. Women thus have more control over how their time is spent and are able to participate freely in productive work outside the home. A study on gender and poverty (1989), in India has found that the fertility of illiterate women in different age groups is between 30-50 percent higher than that of literate women. Infant mortality is less among children of educated women.

Literacy is critical in enhancing women’s economic choices by way of improved access to paid employment and higher earnings. Also literacy among women will help in drawing away from the exploitative informal sector and give them more recognition for their work both at household and national levels. Literacy of women would lead to better economic opportunities and hence better income levels in turn would lead to equality and empowerment of women. Education of women will place them on an equal footing with men in decision making positions in economic and political fields. Empowerment of women through education will lead to their greater participation in government and community institutions.

Women are the educators of the next generation. So, making women literate and educate them are pre requisites not only for their equality and empowerment but for the development of the nation. Literacy and education of women can go a long way in making changes not only in the image women have of themselves but also the roles that they play within the society. Through illiteracy gender inequality and female infanticide are common problems, yet it is hoped that literacy will bring in more sensitivity towards these issues in women. In turn, female literacy will help women understand their problems and to understand how the legal system can help them. Literacy will certainly help women to cope with the undesirable superstitions existing in social systems that exploit them in the name of family ties, religion, social mores etc. The laws that are being formulated to help women can only be effective when women themselves are aware enough to take recourse to them [4].

In India, the system of education is gender neutral. The Constitution of India provides for “free and compulsory education for all children” under Article 45. As part of an individual’s personal development, literacy is a right to which every woman as well as man should have access. It enables women to increase their self-confidence, improve their earning capabilities and to play an active role in family and community decision making. Literacy is a means for women to participate on equal terms in the process of social development and change for quantitative and qualitative progress in society, in short for sustainable development [5-10]. But it is seen that illiteracy on a large scale is a major obstacle to development and condemns the battle against equality and empowerment of the women. Over six decades have passed by yet but we are so far from this state of total literacy as envisaged by our constitution.

In Assam also fifty six percent (56.97%) of women, i.e. more than

Year	1991	2001	2011
Assam	53.42	63.25	73.18
Male	61.30	75.23	78.81
Female	43.00	51.85	67.27
India	52.89	61.87	43.03
Male	63.25	71.28	54.61
Female	74.04	82.14	65.46

Sources: Census Report, Govt. of India, 2011.

Table 1: Literacy Rate of Assam and India since 1991 to 2011.

half of the women are illiterate as per 2011 census. An illiterate person is marginalized in every sphere of activity in society and cannot fully participate in social, economic and political life. Illiterate women are invariably caught in a vicious circle of poverty, repeated child-bearing, ill health and powerlessness, lacking the means to break out of their predicament in education.

As the women play an important role in development process, radical measures to increase literacy will enhance their participation in development and at the same time improve their status. Girls are often not considered equal to boys and do not get the same education. Societal customs in some places decide the fate of the women to 'traditional occupations' for which they do not need an educational qualification [11-15].

Empowerment and economic status

Women empowerment is an indispensable tool for economic development and reduction of poverty. Women are an integral part of every society. Participation of women in socio-economic activity is prevalent in all the countries, whether developed or developing. The economic status of women is determined by the role played by them in carrying on economic and non-economic activities in society. The nature and type of economic and non-economic role played by women have undergone continued transformation in accordance with the changes in socio-economic factors, education level, technological developments and with the changing concept regarding the extent to which women's contribution is desirable and necessary. Women are a vital part of Indian economy constituting one third of the national labour force and a major contribution to the survival of the family; the poorer the family, the greater its dependence on women's income and hard work done by them in sustaining families [16-25].

In India, the right of women to public employment is recognized under the Constitution, Article 16 (1) and 16 (2) grant the right to equal opportunity to men and women without any distinction. The National Commission on Labour (1969) also observed the importance of women employment as "the right of women to employment should in no way be considered subordinate or secondary to that of men". Despite progress in several key indicators, a gender analysis of most social and economic data demonstrates that women in India continue to be relatively disadvantaged in matters of survival, health, literacy and productivity [26-30].

In India women face extremely adverse conditions with regard to employment due to various social, cultural, religious and historical factors. Woman because of her traditional role and due to certain social practices remains one such vulnerable section of the society. Her traditional duties and responsibilities do not bear any economic value and as such her contribution to economic development is also not counted [31-40].

The economic transformation taking place in rural India has left women as mere spectators of change, instead of making them active participants in the process of change. This has forced them to do the most strenuous and probably the least interesting type of work. This kind of situation has developed due to the fact that modern technology increases the necessity to deal with factors external to the household. These factors have been traditionally denied to the woman in India by a male dominated society and hence the women loses out. More than 90% of rural women in India are unskilled, restricting them to low paid occupations. Women generally have no control over land and other productive assets, which largely excludes them from access to institutional credit and renders them dependent on high cost informal

sources of credit to secure capital for consumption and/or productive purpose (*International Journal for Women and Gender Research* (Vol.1 (1)).

In Assam also it has been observed that Assam is still at a low level of economic development and hence the inequality in the distribution of income or the inequality in terms of the levels of living of the people is not yet very important. Hence the inequality between men and women is also expected to be low.

Empirical studies about the economic condition of women in India suggest that the participation rate in economic activities is relatively low leading to wastage of human resources and a raising participation rate for women is not the sufficient condition for the upliftment of the status of women.

Now it has been found that real development of a society can take place only when social justice and gender equality are generated. The economic position and the social status of women in the society is influenced by the extent of their income generation activities outside the household [41,42].

Women constitute an important segment of any community and perform multiple roles as mothers, housewives and wage earners. In this sense, education effectively can help women to play these roles more by enhancing their literacy skills, better hygiene, caring for family health, utilization of their leisure time to develop their vocational skills for their economic enhancement, to fight against exploitation and to conquer the disadvantage and discrimination which they suffer from and that is indeed the greater and foremost empowerment.

The existing situation of employment and income for women in rural area does not provide adequate scope to raise the economic status. There are a number of problems faced by the women in enhancing their economic status which lead to their disempowerment.

In this way we can say that woman in Assam is not getting her due share in the employment market particularly in the better paid occupation. Large scale illiteracy among the female population is one of the major causes of this low participation rate. The state has improved in terms of literacy rate over the last two decades. There is no doubt a favourable trend is taking place but the changing economic structure needs not only literate persons but highly skilled professional people. The statistics on enrolment in various institutions in Assam show that technical education has not yet become very popular among the women in Assam.

Social attitude and empowerment

Women empowerment is also related to social attitude towards women's development like traditional belief, superstitions etc. The slow progress of women's empowerment should be analysed after taking into account socio-economic factors such as prevalence of purdah system, child marriage, subjugation after marriage and absence of divorce system etc.

Superstitions and social attitude affect all the stages of the female life cycle, beginning with preconception and the overwhelming value given to males, especially sons and relying on religious and other rituals to conceive a male foetus. Son preference does not stop with expulsion of the unborn female or infanticide of the female after birth, but is sustained through preferential feeding care and other discriminatory treatment.

The women do not get much scope of mobility because of integral part of religious, economic and kinship structures that define the social

domains of females and males. In our society people expect women to be inferior and submissive at home, at work place, to bosses and to those who are powerful.

There are various wrong beliefs, which become obstacles for women. Women suffer from role conflict in a conservative society and traditional family set up. It is found that persistence of traditional norms in regard to women's essentially domestic roles and the addition of new roles in the wider society has created problems of adjustment for them. Most men maintaining a traditional superior position do not come forward to help women in domestic activities. In some cases, the husband's denial of the right of the wife over her own earned money or her privileges to relax or to move freely was found to be related to his domineering attitude towards wife privileges and obligation

There are some superstitions regarding the enrolment of girl child in the school, co-education, equal participation in economic and social life, social expectation regarding motherhood, limited physical mobility, violence at home which have impact on empowerment of women. There is reluctance on the part of employers to employ women except in the women preferred industries or in jobs where women are found to be more suitable or appointing women is more economical than men. Some people consider women to be less efficient and less productive than men. But such type of superstitions or wrong beliefs can be abolished from society only through education. Lack of proper attitude in favour of girl's education in rural areas also stands as a barrier in the way of women empowerment. The purdah system in some states such as Orissa, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Rajasthan and certain other harmful social customs in these states and in others stand in the way of development of girl's education. In some places caste barriers also contribute to this. Further, the parents are not sufficiently favourably disposed towards girl's education as they have not got to understand its value. The parents, the teachers and the social workers should break the barriers existing between these, so that the school becomes the centre of the community life. Many parents who have the desire to educate their children are unable to do so as they are not in favour of co-education beyond the age of 9 plus years.

Generally educated women or girls could not tolerate injustice and inequality and try to assert themselves in different situations. Vimla Mehta (1995) has rightly stated that the concept of womanhood is not limited to home, marriage and reproduction of children but to various other important activities of life that are social, cultural, educational and political. Education gives women mental strength and self-confidence to face problems in life. Mere literacy will not solve all the problems of women's life. Effective implementation of laws and rights would encourage women to face the problems and to overcome it.

Women rights and empowerment

The concept that "Woman is as much a human being as man and thus entitled to the same freedom, rights and responsibilities" is yet to find universal acceptance in spite of the unequivocal assertion that women have complete and equal rights with men in every respect by the International Bill of Human Rights. The Constitution of India has guaranteed equality, liberty and dignity to the women of India. The preamble promises to secure to all its citizens justice, economic, social and political, liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship, equality of status and opportunity and to promote among them all, fraternity assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity of the nation.

The fundamental rights, the directive principles and the fundamental duties give equal status to women and also provide

special protection. Improvement in the status of women was a pledge made by the constitution and admitted by the Government as one of the major task. There are rights conferred on women by the constitution and rights conferred on them legally; political equality is granted to women under the Indian Constitution, guaranteed through instrument of adult franchise and by Article 15 which prohibits discrimination on grounds of sex. But the constitution as sanction is enjoyed only to a limited extent by the women.

The social awareness the consensus towards various social issues varies from person to person. The variation of awareness is also observed between man and woman, educated and uneducated, between working class and elite group. Now a greater awareness is found among women, but the extent of awareness varies significantly between different groups and different religions. The level of literacy and urbanization have an impact on the awareness.

Another important factor of empowerment is decision making power of the women. At the family level rural women have a low level of participation in decision making. In fact their role in household decision on expenditure of the family, and consumption and production decision is negligible.

Although the right to vote for women worked a significant and positive step in the history of women empowerment, yet women's position is not a significant one till today. Women still need some more opportunities to go ahead with their male counterparts.

Women in India suffer from a variety of social and economic disabilities which prevent them from exercising their human rights and freedom in society. During the last few decades, a number of legislations have been passed with a view to ensuring equality of status and of opportunity for women. But in practice, however this equality eludes the Indian women's grasp. An attempt has been made to enumerate the important provisions of some of the laws. These laws have been enacted to remove certain unhappy conditions in which women, particularly Hindu women find themselves.

Women in our societies are not conscious of their property rights. In some cases even if they are aware, they fail to exercise this legal rights due to a number of reasons which are both social and economic. In spite of the enactment of the Hindu Succession Act (1956) daughters are denied to succeed to the property of father along with the surviving sons. Testamentary disposition of property is the surest way to defeat the rights of a daughter.

In spite of the provisions for divorce contained in the Act of 1955, the women rarely utilize this right; this is because Hindu social values in general are opposed to the concept of divorce. The concept that marriage is pre ordinate and indissoluble has added misery to the life of women. This is mainly due to the fact that women in rural areas are less educated and hence unaware about their legal rights. Even when they are aware, economic dependence prevents a woman from seeking relief in courts of law. Even the knowledge of adultery on the part of husband, prevent a wife from seeking divorce for fear of social ostracism. Expenses involved in court cases also prevent a married woman from exercising her rights.

Divorced women do not fare well in our society. Though law provides for a divorced woman to get re-married, in reality, after divorcing it is not easy for a woman to get married, considering the social norms that govern the society. Similar is the case of widows and society does not favour their re-marriage. The widow's re-marriage Act remains only as a document.

Now, it is cleared that women rights and empowerment are independent. The ability to exercise rights by women in socio-economic decision making can bring about empowerment. When a woman fails to enjoy her rights provided by the Indian Constitution, then the problem of disempowerment may arise. According to United Nation Population Information Network (POPIN) guidelines on women's empowerment has five components viz. women's sense of self-worth; their rights to have access to opportunities and resources; their rights to have the power to control their own lives, both within and outside the home; and their ability to influence the direction of social change to create a mere just social and economic order, nationally and internationally.

The Constitution of India provides equal rights and privileges for men and women. Though men and women are declared to be equal before the law as well as tough discrimination on the basis of sex is forbidden by the constitution, it is commonly observed that women are still at a disadvantage in India in many areas of life. Besides, educational provisions made by different commissions and the constitution women are not enjoying equal status with men which is very essential for their empowerment. Therefore, by analyzing all these points it is observed that education plays a vital role in strengthening the status of women.

Conclusion

Empowerment of women is not a one way process- it is not the adult educators and activists can go and empower others. It is a two way process in which we empower and get empowered. This is an ongoing journey for all of us. No one can become empowered for good and then become an expert in empowering others. At last we believe that women need to be empowered because women have and will lead us in our search for a world free of violence and war. Women have led the peace and ecology movements in many parts of the world. She believes that sustainable development has to be women centred. Women take care of the basic needs of society like food, fodder, fuel, shelter, nurturing. They are also more in tune with nature. According to us empowerment of women, means many things in Assam and India-

- (1) It means recognizing women's contribution to women knowledge
- (2) It means helping women fight their own fears and feelings of inadequacy and inferiority
- (3) It means women enhancing their self-respect and self-dignity
- (4) It means women controlling their own bodies
- (5) It means women becoming economically independent and self-reliant.
- (6) It means women controlling resources like land and property
- (7) It means reducing women's burden of work, specially within the home
- (8) It means creating and strengthening women's groups and organizations.
- (9) It means promoting qualities of nurturing, caring gentleness not just in.

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