

Women Empowerment in India with special reference to the North-east sector:Unleashing a Better Tomorrow

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Abstract:

Women play a very important role in the development of any community. However, India being a vast country, is a witness to a multiplicity of roles that women play in the different parts of the country. In some regions, women are offered inferior status in society and subjected to violence; some regions of the country bear testimony to the higher status of women in society. This paper seeks to bring focus on the empowerment status of women in India with a special reference to the North-Eastern region of the country. This paper sheds light on the ambivalence of roles that the women in Northeast India are subjected to and tries to bring awareness to the various opportunities that can play an important role in the development of women in the various sections of life.

Keywords: Empowerment, Education, Violence, Women

Introduction:

This paper is developed as a short concept note for stimulating discussion on the significance and measurement of gender equality in relation to the empowerment of women in North--East India and especially the women of Southern Assam. The terms gender parity and gender equality are reflected in one of the six EFA goals elucidated in the Dakar Framework for Action (2000)(1) as follows:

“Eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005, and achieving gender equality in Education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls’ full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality.”

Elimination of gender inequality and disparity in primary and secondary education is also highlighted as a target identified as essential to fulfil goal 3 of the Millennium Development Goals, viz., promote gender equality and empower women.

Keeping in mind these new international commitments, it is very important to work with sufficient insight on the significant role played by gender equality, education, and empowerment when it comes to the life of women representing the North-Eastern part of our country so that we can explore the common links between them and identify the best mechanism to measure progress towards the goals.

This paper has been designed to address the issue of education and empowerment in the life of the women, the women of North-East India, which in turn can ensure gender equality and gender parity, which India is conceptually demanding. Education can be a strong instrument for the empowerment of women, but it can never ensure complete empowerment. For that vision to materialize, it is important that men and women enjoy equal rights, equal economic opportunities, equal representation in decision-making bodies, and freedom from the threat of violence and coercion. To materialize our vision of the idyllic world, it is, therefore, of utmost importance to evade the gender gaps prevalent in the North-Eastern part of our country and thereby affirm that gender equality and female empowerment are integral to the overall development of a nation.

Defining the key terms:

Like race and ethnicity, gender is a social construct. As Simon de Beauvoir, an existentialist philosopher in the early 20th century, in her famous book *Second Sex*, uttered, "One is not born, but rather, becomes a woman." It defines and differentiates the roles, rights, responsibilities, and obligations of women and men. The innate biological differences between males and females are re-interpreted by society to create a set of societal norms and expectations that define the behaviors that are appropriate for women and men and that determine women's and men's differential access to rights and resources, and power in society.

Definition of Gender Equality:

The term gender equality has been interpreted in multiple ways in the development of literature and has been the subject of great debate in the UN. According to the UN(2002), "Equality is the cornerstone of every democratic society that aspires to social justice and human rights." Several expert reports have been formed with reference to the conceptual clarity of gender equality. The United Nations Human Development Report (1995) refers to gender equality in terms of capabilities in different aspects like education, health, and nutrition and opportunities in terms of economic sector and decision-making.

Definition of Empowerment:

The concept of empowerment is related to gender equality but is distinct from it in some aspects. Based on a review of literature on the definition and measurement of women's empowerment, Malhotra, Schuler, and Boender (2002) conclude that empowerment is a process that marks change over a period of time and requires that the individual being empowered is involved as a significant agent in the change process. Several experts opine that an empowered woman is one who can formulate strategic choices and can control resources and decisions that affect important life outcomes (Kabeer 1999). The core concept of empowerment lies in the ability of the woman to control her own destiny.

Status of Women in North-East India:

In the North-Eastern States of India, which is both geographically and economically isolated from the rest of India in terms of development, the status of women is quite ambiguous. If we isolate the women of the Northeast from the rest of India, the women of the Northeast enjoy greater freedom and mobility. Malpractices like dowry and bride-burning are not prevalent in this region. The lack of these malpractices often ensures the fact that violence against women is not a major concern in this region. On the other hand, if we centre our focus only on Assam, the high rate of domestic violence in Assam is reflected in a study conducted by the Law Research Institute, Guwahati. The study covered 23 districts of Assam that reported 10,423 registered cases of violence against women, including rape, dowry, molestation, and kidnapping over the past decade. In addition to the violence inflicted, the healthcare facilities available to women make the scenario even bleaker.

According to National Family Health Survey II (NFHS II), women in Assam have limited access to health care services. The percentage of women in Assam receiving antenatal checkups is 5% behind the rest of India and 8% behind the other North-Eastern States. The number of deliveries assisted by the healthcare professionals in Assam is half in number if compared with the rest of India. Even maternal mortality in Assam is amongst the highest in the entire country. (2)

If the question comes to women's autonomy, findings of NFHS II for the state of Assam were as follows: only 5 percent of respondents are not involved in any household decision-making, 88 percent are involved in decisions about cooking, 65 percent in decisions about their own healthcare, etc. The study shows that 35 percent of respondents are allowed to spend money that they can spend as per their wishes. (3)

Status of women belonging to southern Assam:

Located in the southern region of the state, the districts in Southern Assam cover approximately 6000 sq km in area. It shares borders with Manipur in the east and west, Meghalaya, and Bangladesh in the south. The sex ratio of southern Assam is 945 females per 1000 males, and the female literacy rate is 59.85%. The women in Southern Assam are quite facilitated in terms of education by the presence of many reputed educational institutions like Assam University, Silchar Medical College, National Institute of Technology and Ramanuj Gupta Junior College, etc. These eminent educational institutions give ample opportunities to women to work towards the fulfilment of their dreams in different spheres. It is a well-known fact that Southern Assam is not well equipped with the facilities of roads and transport as compared to the rest of the regions in Assam; this lack of facilities is not creating any hindrance in the path of development of women.

Although we can definitely feel proud of the presence of the premier educational institutes in this region, a statistical report based on the percentage of male and female literacy ratio proves otherwise. Certain courses of study at Assam University (AU) and the National Institute of Technology (NIT) show fewer female students as compared with their male counterparts. A study based on male and female literacy rates in some departments like Computer Science, Law, and Mathematics of Assam University and the M.Tech course at the

National Institute of Technology sheds perfect light on the issue of advancement of female literacy in terms of technology-based education.

Figure 1:

<u>Name of the Course</u>	<u>Name of the institute offering the course</u>	<u>percentage of girls enrolled in the course (Approx)</u>	<u>Percentage of boys enrolled in the course (Approx)</u>
B.Sc/M.Sc in Computer Science	Assam University	45	55
Integrated Law Course	Assam University	65	35
M.Sc in Mathematics	Assam University	30	70
M.Tech	National Institute of Technology, Silchar	20	80

The statistics mentioned in figure 1 reveal some astonishing facts. Although the Law course shows the major presence of female students, the rest of the departments in the above-mentioned chart support an entirely different scenario. Although India is advancing technologically and is proving its worth in the entire world, the females in the Southern part of the State Assam are lagging behind in technology education. According to International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW), technology education can enable women to develop their economic potential, become stronger leaders, and contribute to their families, communities, and local economies more effectively. Specifically, we can ensure that various technologies can help women increase their productivity as well as launch income-generating pursuits and entrepreneurial ventures. It is said that when one woman helps another, amazing things happen. This fact should also be true in the case of the women in North-East India, especially the women representing the southern part of Assam.

But the above-mentioned percentages of female literacy can never make us forget about the illiterate females in this part of the state. In many parts of the Southern Region of Assam, education does not lighten the lives of the inhabitants, especially the female inhabitants. The foremost factor limiting this female education is poverty. Economics plays a key role when it comes to coping with direct costs such as tuition fees, cost of textbooks, uniforms, transportation, and other expenses. Wherever, especially in families with many children, these costs exceed the income of the family, girls are the first to be denied schooling.

This bleak scenario of female literacy should be empowered with the right to education in equal measures. We should always remember that educating girls is one of the best investments a society can make. An educated woman has the skills, self-confidence, and information she needs to become a better parent, worker, and citizen.

Recommendations:

Gender stereotyping, which is prevalent in North-East India, should be encountered with the proper development of policies in national and international arenas. It is only gender

equality properly defined that can strengthen a country's ability to grow, reduce poverty, and provide its people – men, women, and children – a better life. If the literacy rate increases, awareness among women will naturally help them foster their own development. For the North-Eastern States of India, an awakening has been widespread among the NGOs and other female rights advocates to establish a state commission for women.

A large body of evidence shows that if literacy programs for uneducated women are designed on basic facilitations provided by education, they are encouraged to facilitate, in turn, better education outcomes for their children.

Conclusion:

The North-Eastern states of India are not facilitated by the common platform where issues regarding gender disparity and gender inequality can be addressed with potent insight and active initiation. Southern Assam, in fact, needs the special collaboration of the state and national agencies for the upliftment of women. However, women's rights organizations should play an active role in this regard. They have to make the residents of the entire Southern Assam aware of the rapid developments that have taken place not only in India but also outside our country. In many Asian Countries, from the immense fight for women's rights, increasing participation of women in the job market, and the right to vote, women have emerged from the strictly private sphere to which they were formerly restricted. Women have broken the implicit social contract that, for more than hundreds of years, confined them to home, child-rearing, household tasks, and fieldwork while men worked outside the home.

On the verge of the 21st century, where in every other nation, state, and city, women are enjoying the maximum rights and opportunities, the women of North-East India, including those belonging to Southern Assam, should be the active participators in the chorus of life. They should be endowed with equal rights and opportunities, which in turn will reveal the extreme potentials a woman possesses as a human being; as Eleanor Roosevelt has rightly said, "A woman is like a Tea Bag, you never know how strong it is until it's in hot water."

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