

Gender Disparity and Women Empowerment in Assam

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Abstract

The present paper is an attempt to analyze the status of women vis-à-vis men and their empowerment in terms of various socioeconomic and political 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. Districts like Kamrup and Tinsukia in spite of having high per capita DDP have not been able to transform the development effort to bridge the gender gap. Districts with high literacy rates are having high proportion of female main and marginal workers and low proportion of non-workers. Higher the literacy higher is the female workforce participation rate. Female enrolment rate is below fifty per cent in spite of universalization of primary education and provision of mid-day meal schemes. 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. There is a need to create awareness towards achieving the desired goal of women empowerment in the state.

Key words : *Gender disparity, women empowerment, Assam, India, household decision making power, financial autonomy, freedom of movement, domestic violence.*

1. Introduction

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 disadvantageous 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. NHDR (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 (Govt. of Assam, 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 in the state of Assam. The main objectives of the paper is to analyze the status of women vis-à-vis men and their empowerment in terms of various socioeconomic and political 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.

2. Gender Disparity and Women Empowerment: Conceptual Issues

Gender Disparity : Past few decades have witnessed a steady increase in awareness of the need to empower women and achieve gender equality through various measures. The concept of gender equality has been gaining importance since subordinate status of women in relation to men has been seen in almost every facets of life. Gender equality is understood as that stage of human development at which the rights, responsibilities and opportunities of individuals are not to be determined by the fact of being born as male or female. It is a stage when both men and women realize their full potential and become partners in every sphere of their lives. Realizing the extent of gender inequality throughout the world, the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) was established as a separate fund within the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in 1984. The General Assembly at that time instructed to ensure women's involvement with mainstream activities. The Platform of Action resulting from the 1995 Beijing World Conference on Women expanded the concept and called it as 'gender mainstreaming' i.e., the application of gender perspectives to all legal and social norms and standards, to all policy development, research, planning, advocacy, development, implementation and monitoring- as a mandate for all member states. As a result of the Beijing conference and many years of work leading

up to it, more than 100 countries announced new initiatives to improve the status of women. In 2000, the follow-up Beijing+5 Conference further strengthened the application of the mainstreaming concept and used it to highlight the need for more progress in reaching equality worldwide.

In 1995 main emphasis on gender equality was given in the Human Development Report (UNDP, 1995). At the global level for the first time just before the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing two important gender indices were constructed by UNDP (1995): the Gender related Development Index (GDI) and the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM). The GDI considered inequalities by gender in the Human Development Index (HDI) dimensions. It measured the inequalities confronted by women in achievement of those which were very essential for overall development of human being. The GEM focused on political participation (measured by women's shares of parliamentary seats), economic participation (shares of high level and professional positions) and power over economic resources (income gaps).

The disadvantages facing women and girls are a major source of inequality. Very often, women and girls are discriminated against health, education and in labor markets-with negative repercussions for their freedoms. In 2010 report, UNDP further introduced a third measure of inequality known as Gender Inequality Index (GII) built on the same framework as the HDI and the Inequality adjusted Human Development Index (IHDI) in order to better expose differences in the distribution of achievements between women and men. The GII is unique in including educational attainment, economic and political participation and female-specific health issues and in accounting for overlapping inequalities at the national level. Thus it became an important advancement on existing global measures of gender equity.

Along with those measures of gender inequality another measure to capture the magnitude and scope of gender-based inequalities is known as Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI). This was introduced by the World Economic Forum (WEF) in 2005. The Index benchmarks gender gaps on economic, political, education and health based criteria, and provide country rankings that allow for effective comparisons across regions and income groups, and over time. The GGGI examines the gap between men and women in four fundamental categories: economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival and political empowerment.

Women Empowerment: The concept of empowerment of women has, however, undergone a sea change from welfare oriented approach to equity approach. Today empowering women refers not only to improve their material wellbeing but also their active participation in the development process. The concept of women in development emerged at a point of time when attention was shifted to enhancement of the role and status of women. Then equity and empowerment approach merged to form the gender and development concept (Mathew, 2003). Although many researchers made attempts to

explain the concept of empowerment, the most relevant definition is one provided by Sen and Batliwala (2000). According to them "Empowerment is the process by which the powerless gain greater control over the circumstances of their lives. It includes both controls over resources and ideology... a growing intrinsic capability, greater self-confidence and an inner transformation of one's consciousness that enables one to overcome external barriers [as quoted by Kishor & Gupta (2004): 694]. This definition mainly emphasizes on two important aspects: Firstly, empowerment is not a power over others but a power to achieve certain desired goals. Secondly, the idea of empowerment is more applicable to those who are powerless irrespective of sex, caste or class. According to the report on Human Development in South Asia (2000: 28), "Empowerment can be considered a change in the context of a woman or man's life that enables her/him increased capacity to lead a fulfilling human life, characterized by external qualities such as health, mobility, education and awareness, status in the family, participation in decision making, and level of material security, as well as internal qualities such as self-awareness and self-confidence".

3. Methodology

In order to examine the status of women empowerment 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, Nagaon, Lakhimpur, Nalbari, N.C. Hills, Sonitpur and Tinsukia) and Higher Literacy districts (above 70%: Jorhat, Kamrup and Sibsagar). Further, districts are divided into three groups on the basis of per capita District Domestic Product, namely Low DDP districts (below Rs.15000: Darrang, Dhemaji, Dhubri, Goalpara, Hailakandi, Karimganj, Kokrajhar, Lakhimpur, Morigoan, Nagaon, Nalbari and Sonitpur), Moderate DDP districts (Rs.15000-25000: Barpeta, Bongaigoan, Cachar, Dibrugarh Golaghat, Jorhat and Karbi Anglong) and High DDP districts (above Rs.25000: Kamrup, N.C. Hills, Sibsagar and Tinsukia).

4. Status of Women Empowerment

Employment Status: To analyze the status of women on the basis of their employment status, we have considered in this section percentage distribution of workers

(main, marginal and non-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 (Table 1). These data throw some light on the gender structure of workforce in the economy. 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.

Table 1
Area, Literacy and Per Capita DDP wise Workers in Assam, 2001
(Figures in per cent)

Category		Main Worker		Marginal Worker		Non Worker	
		Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Geographical Area	Lower Assam	43.23	7.31	5.59	7.85	51.34	84.84
	Central Assam	42.38	8.33	6.96	9.50	50.65	82.15
	Upper Assam	41.68	15.62	11.47	39.55	47.63	66.90
Level of Literacy	Low	44.37	4.27	4.81	3.85	51.76	91.87
	Moderate	42.56	8.48	6.17	10.61	51.25	80.90
	High	41.91	11.09	8.45	12.04	49.62	76.76
	Higher	43.39	10.68	7.62	10.74	48.97	78.56
Per Capita DDP	Low	42.51	8.60	7.42	10.92	50.17	80.47
	Moderate	42.01	10.75	7.54	11.38	50.44	77.70
	High	43.30	11.77	7.20	9.99	49.48	78.22
All Assam	42.45	9.82	7.41	10.89	50.13	79.28	

Source : Govt. of India, Census of India, 2001

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.

There is also a positive relationship between the level of DDP and percentage of female main workers. Almost same pattern is observed in case of male main workers. However, the same relationship is not observed in case of female marginal and non-workers. We can see from the table that High DDP districts have lowest proportion of female marginal workers and Moderate DDP districts have the lowest proportion of female non workers. As usual proportion of main workers among male population is relatively higher than that of female counterparts. Similarly marginal and non-worker proportion of females exceeds that of males.

Now let us analyze the work force participation rate in Assam. If we analyze on the basis of geographical location, we find that most of the Upper Assam districts show high proportion of total workforce participation as well as high female workforce participation implying the area to be a relatively developed one (Table 2). Further the district Lakhimpur exhibits highest percentage of total workforce participation (55.99%) and high percentage of female workforce participation (49.87%). However, male workforce participation rate does not differ much across district groups. The districts in Lower Assam and Central Assam show almost same pattern of low workforce participation rate as compared to Upper Assam.

Table 2
Area wise Workforce Participation Rate in Assam, 2001
(Figures in per cent)

Category		Person	Male	Female
Geographical Area	Lower Assam	32.49	48.66	15.16
	Central Assam	32.23	49.05	14.42
	Upper Assam	42.98	52.36	32.90
Level of Literacy	Low	28.73	48.23	8.12
	Moderate	34.36	48.74	19.09
	High	37.20	50.37	23.13
	Higher	36.89	51.02	21.43
Per Capita DDP	Low	35.11	49.82	19.52
	Moderate	36.29	49.55	22.13
	High	36.83	50.51	21.77
All Assam		35.78	49.87	20.71

Source : Govt. of India, Census of India, 2001

Male workforce participation rate does not vary much with the literacy rate. However, percentage of female workforce participation significantly varies and it is positively related with the literacy rate. Dhubri, which exhibit low literacy i.e. below 50 per cent, shows a very poor participation of females (8%) in total workforce. High and higher literacy rate districts show relatively high percentage of female workforce participation.

Table further reveal that there is a positive relationship between the level of DDP and percentage of total workforce participation rates. The same pattern is observed in case of female workforce participation rate as long as the per capita DDP level is not reached to the extent of above 25000. However in case of males it does not differ much according to DDP. Thus from the above analysis it is clear that the upper Assam districts which have higher literacy rate and higher DDP show relatively better female employment status. To examine the nature and status of women employment in the Public Sector (Govt.) of the state it is important to know their class wise distribution. Table 3 shows the number and percentage of total women employee in 1994. Data reveal that only 14.98% of total government employees were women. They were mostly employed in class III category of government services. This shows a very disappointing picture about status of women employment in Assam. Since class wise distributions of up-to-date data are not available for women employees we had to depend only on aggregate information on percentage of women govt. employee in the year 2006. As per the statistics of Govt. of Assam (2007) there were only 16.65% of women employees in the govt. jobs. There has not been any significant increase in the per cent of women govt. employees in a period of 12 years from 1994 to 2006.

Table 3
Distribution of Government Women Employees in Assam

Category of Employees	No. of Employees in 1994		Percentage of Women Employee in	
	Total	Women	1994	2006
Class I	8,145	713	8.75	NA
Class II	6,242	374	5.99	NA
Class III	2,36,916	41,025	17.31	NA
Class IV	53,532	3,582	6.69	NA
Total	3,04,835	45,694	14.98	16.65*

Source : Govt. of Assam, *Assam Human Development Report, 2003*

* Statistical Hand Book of Assam, 2007

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. Table 4 presents data on the formation of women SHGs across different geographical regions in the state. 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.

Table 4
Area wise Physical Achievement under SGSY in Assam

Area	Districts	No. of SHGs formed during		No. of Women SHGs formed during		No. of women SHG taken up economic activities during 2006
		1999 to 2006	2006	1999 to 2006	2006	
Lower Assam	Total	39617	4911	21895 (55.26%)	982 (20%)	303
	Average	5660	702	3128	140	43
Central Assam	Total	60118	21930	35791 (59.53%)	438 (1.98%)	408
	Average	6680	2437	3977	48	45
Upper Assam	Total	35887 (68.09%)	10904 (5.09%)	24437	555	188
	Average	5127	1558	3491	79	27
All Assam		135622	37745	82123 (60.55%)	1959 (5.19%)	912

Source: Govt. of Assam, 2006-07

Table 5 shows number of SHGs formed in different districts categorized on the basis of literacy. From the table it is clear that with increase in literacy rate, intensity of SHG formation increases from Moderate Literacy district onwards. 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.

Table 5
Literacy wise Physical Achievement under SGSY in Assam

Literacy	Districts	No. of SHG during		No. of Women SHG during		No. of Women SHG taken up Economic Activities during the Year
		1999 to 2006	2006	1999 to 2006	2006	
Low (Below 50%)	Total	9453	57	4773 (50.49%)	4 (7.02%)	65
	Average	9453	57	4773 (50.49%)	4 (7.02%)	65
Moderate (50%-60%)	Total	38057	531	22388 (58.82%)	287 (54.04%)	257
	Average	4757	66	2798	36	32
High (60%-70%)	Total	66991	30070	41231 (61.55%)	966 (3.21%)	446
	Average	6090	2734	3748	88	41
Higher (Above 70%)	Total	21121	7087	13731 (65.01%)	715 (10.08%)	131
	Average	7040	2362	4577	238	44
All Assam		135622	37745	82123 (60.55%)	1959 (5.19%)	912

Source: Govt. of Assam, 2006-07

Table 6 shows the data on formation of Self Help Groups on the basis of per capita DDP. Data reveals that SHG formation, be it total or women, decreases first with increase in DDP up to moderate level of DDP and then it increases with DDP. Similarly if we see the percentage of women SHGs formed from 1999 to 2006 we find that it varies positively with DDP. But percentage of women SHGs formed during 2006-07 is significantly higher in Moderate level of DDP.

Table 6
Per Capita DDP wise Physical Achievement under SGSY in Assam

Per Capita DDP (Rs.)	Districts	No. of SHG during		No. of Women SHG during		No. of Women SHG taken up Economic Activities during the Year
		1999 to 2006	2006	1999 to 2006	2006	
Low (Below 15000)	Total	84934	26736	48526 (57.13)	869 (3.25)	544
	Average	7078	2228	4044	72	45
Moderate (15000-25000)	Total	30649	575	19685 (64.22)	371 (64.52)	194
	Average	4378	82	2812	53	28
High (Above 25000)	Total	20039	10434	13912 (69.42)	732 (7.02)	161
	Average	5010	2608	3478	183	40
All Assam		135622	37745	82123 (60.55)	1959 (5.19)	912

Source: Govt. of Assam, 2006-07

Educational Status : 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.

If we examine female literacy rate according to DDP, we find a positive relationship. Female literacy rate is increasing with the increase in district domestic product. It is lowest (51%) for Low DDP districts, 56 per cent for Moderate DDP districts and highest (63%) for High DDP districts.

Table 7
Area, Literacy and Per Capita DDP wise Female Literacy in Assam, 2001
(Figures in per cent)

Category		Literacy Rate	
		Female	Total
Geographical Area	Lower Assam	52.53	61.19
	Central Assam	52.61	61.16
	Upper Assam	60.35	69.23
Level of Literacy-	Low	40.04	48.21
	Moderate	47.87	56.71
	High	55.96	64.85
	Higher	66.91	74.71
Per Capita DDP	Low	50.80	59.38
	Moderate	56.16	64.99
	High	62.54	70.94
All Assam		54.61	63.25

Source: Govt. of India, Census of India, 2001

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%.

Table 8
Area, Literacy and Per Capita DDP wise Female Enrolments in Assam, 2005-06
(Figures in per cent)

Category			Pre Primary	Middle	High School	Higher Secondary	Junior College
Geographical Area	Lower Assam		49.69	45.52	42.53	33.30	37.93
	Central Assam		49.43	46.97	43.47	36.51	39.29
	Upper Assam		48.54	46.78	46.52	40.48	42.63
Level of Literacy	Low		49.86	45.14	40.15	30.46	29.03
	Moderate		49.71	46.21	43.56	38.69	39.18
	High		48.99	46.84	44.62	36.26	38.38
	Higher		49.27	45.83	44.41	35.08	41.86
Per Capita DDP	Low		49.62	46.78	43.86	33.64	38.00
	Moderate		48.78	46.06	44.25	41.70	38.2
	High		49.34	45.88	44.45	35.18	41.86
	All Assam		49.32	46.38	44.11	36.27	39.53

Source : Govt. of Assam, Statistical Handbook of Assam, 2007

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%).

When we examine the relationship between the stages of enrolment with per capita DDP from the information provided in the Table 8, we find that no such variation of enrolment at primary level is seen along with DDP among the groups. At high school and in Junior College, enrolment positively varies with DDP whereas at middle level it varies negatively with DDP. If we analyse the female enrolment at higher secondary we see that it is highest for Moderate DDP districts and lowest for High DDP districts.

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. In Table 9, district wise sex ratio for the years 1991 and 2001 is taken into account to study the demographic status of women in the state. 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. Table shows that Central Assam has the highest sex ratio and is higher than that of the state average for both the periods (1991 and 2001) 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. It also shows a declining trend of sex ratio with the increase in DDP. It is highest for Low DDP districts and lowest in High DDP districts. Moderate DDP districts have an average sex ratio.

Table 9
Area, Literacy and Per Capita DDP wise Sex Ratio in Assam

Category		Sex Ratio	
		1991	2001
Geographical Area	Lower Assam	928	933
	Central Assam	930	940
	Upper Assam	915	931

Level of Literacy	Low	951	947
	Moderate	940	942
	High	924	936
	Higher	897	914
Per Capita DDP	Low	937	943
	Moderate	926	937
	High	891	909
	All Assam	925	935

Source: Govt. of India, Census of India, 2001

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 (Nayak, 2011). 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 (Institute of Social Sciences, 2003). 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 (Govt. of Assam, 2003). 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. Table 10 presents data on percentage of women voters and elected women members of Legislative Assembly in Assam during this period. From the table it is clear that the percentage of female voters though has increased steadily over time it has always been less than that of male voters. Similarly percentage of women MLA has increased during this period but it has been quite small in number and percentage. In 1972 there was not even a single woman MLA. The situation, however, has changed and in 2006 less than 11 per cent of MLA's were women.

Table 10
Trend of Women Voters and MLA in Assam
(Figures in per cent)

Year	Voters in Assembly Election		Elected Women Members of Legislative Assembly
	Male	Female	
1972	58.46	41.53	0
1978	58.08	41.91	0.8
1983	58.43	41.56	1.83
1985	54.10	45.89	3.97
1991	54.07	45.92	3.97
2001	53.82	46.15	7.94
2006	52.08	47.84	10.32

Source: Govt. of India, Election Commission of India, 2006

When we analyze the percentage of contestants and winners across districts and areas we observe some degree of disparities (Table 11). Though percentage of voters across districts does not vary much but gender gap is observed in this respect. Table also reveals that Upper Assam performs well as regards percentage of women contestants and winners are concerned. However percentage of electors does not vary significantly across the regions.

Table 11
Area, Literacy and Per Capita DDP wise Winners in Legislative
Assembly in Assam, 2006
(Figures in per cent)

Category		Voters		Contestants		Winners	
		Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Geographical Area	Lower Assam	51.74	48.25	93.57	6.42	90.70	9.30
	Central Assam	51.63	48.36	94.56	5.43	91.84	8.16
	Upper Assam	51.34	48.65	88.88	11.11	88.24	11.76
Level of Literacy	Low	51.38	48.61	93.24	6.75	100	0
	Moderate	51.79	48.20	94.69	5.30	89.47	10.53
	High	51.51	48.48	92.37	7.62	88.14	11.86
	Higher	51.56	48.43	90.72	9.27	95.45	4.55

Per Capita DDP	Low	51.42	48.57	93.95	6.04	92.06	7.94
	Moderate	51.78	48.21	90.61	9.38	85.37	14.63
	High	51.77	48.22	94.33	5.66	95.45	4.55
	Assam	51.6	48.4	92.97	7.02	90.48	10.52

Source: Govt. of India, Election Commission of India, 2006

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.

From the Table it is also clear that percentage of women contestants and winners vary more or less positively with DDP per capita. It increases from low level to moderate level and then decrease at high level of DDP. However, percentage of voters does not show any variation across per capita DDP.

5. A Comparison between Assam and India

National Family Health Survey - III pertains to data collected on various indicators of women empowerment (Govt. of India, 2005-06). 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. In this regard data presented in Table 12 shows a comparison between Assam and India in respect of household decision making. 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.

Table 12
Women's Household Decision Making in Assam

Percentage of Women who Usually Make Specific Decisions Alone or Jointly with their Husband					
State/Country	Own Health Care	Making Major Household Purchases	Making Purchases of Daily Household Needs	Visit to the Family or Relatives	Participating in all the Four Decisions
Assam	80.0	72.0	70.6	80.9	60.5
India	62.2	52.9	60.1	60.5	36.7

Source: Govt. of India, NFHS - III

Employment is another important indicator of empowerment. If we see the percentage of non-workers in Assam and India as shown in Table 13 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.

Table 13
Percentage of Non Workers in Assam, 2001
(Figures in per cent)

India/ State	Total			Rural			Urban		
	Person	Male	Female	Person	Male	Female	Person	Male	Female
Assam	64.12	50.0	79.20	63.55	50.23	77.72	68.02	48.97	89.71
India	60.74	48.07	74.32	58.03	47.64	69.02	67.77	49.15	88.45

Source: Govt. of Assam, Assam Human Development Report, 2003

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 (Table 14). 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.

Table 14
Workforce Participation Rate in Assam, 2001
(Per 1000 Persons)

State/ Country	Person	Total		Rural			Urban		
		Male	Female	Person	Male	Female	Person	Male	Female
Assam	359	499	205	364	498	223	320	510	103
India	393	519	257	420	524	310	322	508	115

Source: Govt. of Assam, Assam Human Development Report, 2003

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. Table 15 shows women's access to these resources in case of India and Assam. From the table it is clear that 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%)

Table 15
Women's Access to Money and Credit in Assam, 2005-06

India/states	Percentage of Women having			
	Access to Money and its Use	Bank A/C and its Use	Knowledge of Micro Credit Programme	Taken Loan from a Micro Credit Programme
India	44.6	15.0	38.6	4.0
Assam	26.9	11.7	41.7	1.4

Source: Govt. of India, NFHS - III

Another important evidence of empowerment of women is their attitude towards unequal gender role that prevails in the society (Gupta & Kishor, 2004). 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. Table 16 shows women's attitude towards wife beating in India and Assam. Less number of women in Assam believes that wife beating is justified in comparison to India as a whole. In Assam, women justify wife beating if they neglect their home and show disrespect to in laws.

Table 16
Women's Attitude towards Wife Beating in Assam, 2005-06

State/ Country	Percentage of Women who believe Wife Beating to be justified for any of the following Specific Reasons						
	Not Cook- ing Properly	Neglecting Children /Home	Disresp- ecting In Laws	Suspec- ted by Husband as Unfai- thful	Refusing to have Sex with Husband	Going out of Home without Permiss- ion of Husband	At Least One of the Specific Reasons
Assam	11.0	31.4	32.4	16.4	11.5	23.4	44.6
India	20.4	34.7	40.0	25.1	14.1	29.0	54.4

Source: Govt. of India, NFHS - III

Domestic violence is one of the factors which affect the process of women empowerment. An environment in which women are under threat of continuous violence curtails their ability to control, or even access resources (Heise, Ellsberg and Goitemoeller, 1998). Unfortunately domestic violence is prevalent in Assam. Table 17 shows women's experience of different forms of violence in the state vis-à-vis India in 2005-06. Relatively less women (24.7%) in Assam experience physical violence as compared to all India situations (26.9%). However women of Assam are more prone to both physical and sexual violence (36.5%) than India as a whole (35.4%).

Table 17
Women's Experience of Different Forms of Violence, 2005-06

Experience of different Forms of Violence by Women in the Age Group 15-49 Years				
State/ Country	Physical Violence only	Sexual Violence only	Either Physical or Sexual Violence	Both Physical and Sexual Violence
Assam	24.7	2.2	9.6	36.5
India	26.9	1.8	6.7	35.4

Source: Govt. of India, NFHS - III

6. Summery and Conclusion

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. This shows only poor participation of women in the state politics. Study at the disaggregate level reveals that percentage of women contestants and winners in the Assembly Election in the state was relatively high in Upper Assam and it varied more or less positively with Literacy and DDP per capita. No Such variation was seen when we examined the percentage of voters. However gender gap existed in all the situations.

Inter district disparity is rampant in the state. Districts like Kamrup and Tinisukia in spite of having high per capita DDP have not been able to transform the development effort to bridge the gender gap. Districts with high literacy rates are having high proportion of female main and marginal workers and low proportion of non-workers. 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. Employment and educational status vary positively with per capita DDP. It is seen that total work force participation rate, proportion of female main, marginal and non-workers, female literacy and female enrolment rates are low in Low DDP districts and high for High DDP districts. 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 and DDP per capita.

When we examine the factors like household decision making, control over resources, freedom of movement, workforce participation rate, women's experience of violence, attitude towards unequal gender role etc in the context of both Assam and India, we find some interesting result. Women in general enjoy better status in the state as compared to women in India in terms of decision making power at the household level. Higher percentage of women in Assam participates in all the four household decision making as against India. Proportion of women taking decision jointly with their husband or alone in any of the decisions is also higher in Assam than in India. Female workforce participation rate is lower in the state than that in India.

Rural urban gap in respect of employment is seen both in Assam and India. Minor differences are seen in this regard in case of rural female employment in Assam and India; however urban female employment is almost same for both Assam and India. Regarding female non worker, it is higher in Assam than in India. More women of Assam are prone to sexual violence in comparison to India; however physical violence is more in India than in Assam. When we analyse women's attitude towards wife beating, we find that less women of Assam support the cases of wife beating as compared to India. 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. SHGs formation varies more or less positively with literacy rate and DDP Per Capita.

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 women empowerment in the state.

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