Women Empowerment and Economic Development: A Study of Barak Valley of Assam

Introduction

The status of women and their eminence in any society is a mark of its civilization. Women are to be weighed up as equal partners in the process of development. But due to exploitation and suppression from centuries, the position of Indian women in the society has remained at the receiving end. After independence, though substantial progresses have been taking place in the lives of women but there still remains a bleak picture. Even in today’s modern society, women are not treated equally potential like men. There continues to be resistance against viewing women as professionals, as economically independent person, and parents and the society still wish to see her as a dutiful wife and responsible mother first, rather her professional carrier. A majority of women are still underprivileged in a tradition bound society where there is a distinction between lawful legitimacy and general practice.

Discrimination against girls and women in the developing world is a devastating reality. It results in millions of individual tragedies, which add up to loss of potential for entire economy. Globally, one in every three women is subjected to violence during her lifetime. Indian women are also victims of social discrimination and have a low status within the family. The logic behind such discrimination is such that girls appear as a liability for the family as they have to be married off, often with huge dowry, whereas boys are considered an asset as they carry on the family lineage and support the family in times of financial needs and bring in dowry (Human Development in South Asia, 2000). India is a country which contains mainly with patriarchal society in which a cultural bias against women has contributed to frequent cases of female infanticide, particularly in poor and rural areas. The position of women in the development of a society has never been considered on the same level as that of men. On the other hand, the achievements of men folk and their contributions
to the development processes have always been given priority. In many parts of India, women are viewed as an economic liability despite their various contributions to our society and economy. In many rural areas, women do not belong to themselves and their physical well-being, health, security and bodily integrity are all beyond their control.

Women are the wheels of a nation, constituting almost fifty per cent of the total population. Women by all means can be very effectual agents of change for a better home, society and ultimately a better economy. Empowerment of women is essential for improving women’s lives and accelerating economic growth and development as a whole.

Empowerment is a multi-dimensional process. It is a process that helps and assesses people, both men and women to realize their identity, becoming aware of the capacity and potential and strive for success, happiness and peace of mind. Gender empowerment generally implies woman empowerment because women are mostly neglected in the society and they always become victims of exploitation, violence and all forms of discrimination. But, without the participation of women a nation or a society cannot achieve its inclusive growth and development of the economy. So, it is of utmost necessity to empower women as they form a large component of human resources of our country.

Empowerment of women, in its simplest form means the manifestation of redistribution of powers that challenges patriarchal ideology and male dominance. It signifies balance of power between males and females. This power can be the control over physical, natural, intellectual, financial and human resources along with the control over their self-esteem. In recent perspectives, empowerment of women has become a serious area of study. Empowerment of women may arise from three dimensions – social, economic and political. Social dimension of empowerment signifies respectable and non-discriminatory position in the society. Political dimension of empowerment relates to their involvement in the
governance of the nation from Panchayat to national Parliament level. Economic empowerment means to have equality of power in the economic resources.

Empowerment is essential for promoting development activities. A number of areas of activity in development have become closely associated with the promotion of women’s empowerment, such as micro-credit, political participation and reproductive health and much innovative work has been done in these areas.

Statement of the Problem

Women, the first educator of a child, constitute nearly 50 per cent of world’s population. They play a very crucial role in reproduction, rearing and bearing children, looking after the family and supply of workforce in the labor market. But the social, political, economic and cultural status of women is far less than that of men in developing countries.

In India, male dominations and gender discrimination are customized habitually. Though the Constitution of India is based on the principle of liberty, fraternity, equality and justice to all citizens but, unfortunately these affirmations are only in the Constitution. The fruits of development are not being shared by men and women on any front. Women are lagged behind not because that they are incapable but they have been denied the opportunity to prove their mettle.

It has been increasingly felt that everywhere in the country, women are facing threats to their lives, health and well-being. In spite of the various welfare related activities for women, the plight of women in the country is not very sound. In all spheres of their life, they are discriminated. They are getting less education, enjoying less health care facilities and less nutrition than men but are being over-represented among poor and powerless. Though some progress in developing women’s capabilities have been made, women and men still live in an unequal world.
Area of the Study:

For the study, the area ‘Barak Valley’ of the state Assam has been selected. Barak Valley is situated in the southern part of Assam. It mainly consists of three districts viz; Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi.

Objectives of the Study:

The present study has focused on the following specified objectives:

(i) To examine the socio-economic status of women in Barak Valley.
(ii) To investigate the problems that women are facing in Barak Valley.
(iii) To construct a Women Empowerment Index.
(iv) To study the rural-urban disparities of women empowerment in Barak Valley.
(v) To examine the relationship between women empowerment and economic development.
(vi) To evaluate how far the programmes and policies for empowerment of women taken by the government have proven successful in raising the status of women in Barak Valley.

Research Questions:

On the basis of the above mentioned objectives, some research questions have been framed which are given follow:

(i) What is the present socio-economic status of both rural and urban women in Barak Valley?
(ii) What are the problems that women are facing in Barak Valley?
(iii) Is there any rural-urban disparities of women empowerment in Barak Valley and if it is then up to what extent?
(iv) How women empowerment and economic development are inter-related?
(v) How far the programmes and policies for empowerment of women taken by the Government have proven successful in raising the status of women in Barak Valley?
Data Sources:

The study is based on both primary data and secondary data. Primary data have been collected from 400 households by using stratified random sampling i.e; 160 from the urban area and 240 from the rural area of the Barak Valley through personal interview by preparing a suitable questionnaire.

Secondary data have been collected from different government publications, books and journals, Census Reports of India, Govt. of India, Human Development Reports, Statistical Hand Book of Assam, District Election Offices of Barak Valley and various NGOs etc.

Outline of the Chapters:

Chapter 1 is the introductory chapter which includes background of the study, statement of the problem and necessity of the study, objectives, hypotheses, area of the study, data sources and outline of the chapters.

Chapter 2 consists of the review of literature which is combined by both theoretical and empirical literatures. These literatures mainly focus on the problems of women, determinants of women empowerment, status of women, relation between women and development, role of NGOs and microfinance for development of women and other related aspects of both domestic and foreign countries.

Chapter 3 discusses the Theoretical and Conceptual Framework and Methodology of the study. The methodology is divided into two parts viz; methodology for data collection and methodology for data analysis.

The study is based on both primary data and secondary data. Primary data have been collected from the urban area and the rural area of the Barak Valley. A set of primary data have been collected from the urban area of the Barak Valley by using two-stage stratified random sampling method. In the Barak Valley, there are three districts viz. Cachar, Karimganj
and Hailakandi and in each district, there is one Municipal Board (MB) and one Town Committee (TC) and some Census Towns (CT). In the first stage, only one urban area is selected from each district. The selection of urban area is based on large demographic size. Naturally, the district headquarters have been selected from each district because of its huge population. In the second stage, the number of households have been selected proportionately (5:2:1) according to their demographic size from the three selected head-quarters of these three districts. A total of 160 households have been selected randomly from the urban area. Another set of data have been collected from the rural area of the Barak Valley by using three-stage stratified random sampling method. There are 15 blocks in Cachar District, seven in Karimganj District and five in Hailakandi District. In the first-stage, three blocks from Cachar District, two from Karimganj and one from Hailakandi have been selected. This selection is based on large demographic size. In the second stage, five large villages have been selected from the each selected block according to demographic size. So, a total of 30 villages have been selected accordingly. In the last stage, eight households have been selected randomly from each of the selected villages. So a total of 240 households have been selected from rural area. Finally, 400 households have been selected from both urban and rural areas of Barak Valley. The primary data have been collected by taking interview from an adult married woman of each family through a same set of scheduled questionnaire for both urban and rural sectors.

To analyze the first objective, both secondary and primary information regarding the socio-economic and political status of women have been used.

To investigate the problems faced by the women, tabular and graphical analysis have been done.
For measuring women empowerment status, Women Empowerment Index (WEI) has been constructed. For the construction of Women Empowerment Index (WEI), Principal Component method has been used.

To examine the rural urban disparities, a comparison of women empowerment status between rural sector and urban sector has been done. For examining the link between women empowerment and economic development, Economic Development Index (EDI) has been constructed by using eight indicators viz; per capita income, per capita expenditure, literacy, pucca housing condition, sanitary condition, pure drinking water, treatment of drinking water and calorie surplus. EDI is computed by using Principal Component Analysis.

Chapter 4 examines the status of women empowerment in all the three districts of Barak Valley and the problems faced by the women of the region. This chapter is divided into five sections. The first section (Section 4.1) explains the general profile of these three districts of Barak Valley based on secondary data. The second section (Section 4.2) analyses the socio-economic status of women. The third section (Section 4.3) examines the political status of women both from secondary and primary data. The fourth section (Section 4.4) discusses the problems faced by women. The last section involves the construction of Women Empowerment Index (WEI) by using Principal Component method.

The socio-economic status of women is first analyzed through the construction of Gender Development Index (GDI) by using both primary and secondary data. The socio-economic status is then examined through some socio-economic aspects. The educational status of women is examined by comparing it with that of its male counterpart. For examining the decision making power of the women, the degree of autonomy is divided into three parts viz; low degree, moderate degree and high degree. The decision making power of women is analyzed through six aspects viz; daily household needs, visits to relatives, family planning, children’s education, sons’ and daughters’ marriages and major household decisions. The
freedom of movement of women is analysed through percentage of freedom of movement of women inside the locality and outside the locality. For knowing the economic status of women, women’s access to money on five aspects have been considered viz; access to money for small purchases, access to money for large purchases, having bank account, having ATM facilities and operating it by herself.

Political status of women is analyzed through women’s direct participation. The total number of male and female contestants and winners in the Panchayat elections and in the municipality board elections in the three districts of Barak Valley have been collected and compared. Political freedom of women is also analyzed by calculating the percentage of women having freedom to give their opinion and vote as per their own choice.

The problems faced by women are categorized into five parts viz; employed but not free from family obligations, no financial autonomy to spend or save from their own earnings, problem regarding voting by their own choice, willing to study but not having educational freedom and physically / domestically humiliated by family members.

WEI is then calculated for the different selected villages and urban areas of Barak Valley by using Principal Component analysis.

**Chapter 5** focuses on the rural urban disparity in the empowerment of women and discusses the role of government policy in raising women empowerment. This chapter is divided into three sections. Section 5.1 examines the rural urban disparity in the context of social, economic and political empowerment. Section 5.2 deals with the role of various government policies for developing and empowering women in the national level. Section 5.3 discusses on all those government policies which have been implemented in Barak Valley for raising the status of women in the region.

**Chapter 6** deals with examining the relationship between women empowerment and economic development. This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section (Section
6.1) deals with the construction of Economic Development Index (EDI) by using Principal Component method. The second section (Section 6.2) focuses on the impact of women empowerment on economic development and the third section (Section 6.3) emphasizes on the impact of economic development on women empowerment.

**Conclusion:**

The socio-economic status of women in the rural areas of Barak Valley is very poor though the situations in the urban areas are better. In all these three districts, it is observed that GDI is at low level in rural areas and at medium level in urban areas. Equally Distributed Literacy Index (EDLI) is much more than the Equally Distributed Work Participation Index (EDWPI) in all the rural and urban areas of these three districts of Barak Valley which implies that most of the literate women in Barak Valley are not attached in work participation. The low level of GDI is mainly due to the low level of EDWPI values. Education is one of the most important indicators of women empowerment and it is observed that in case of higher studies the percentage of men is more than that of women while in case of lower standard the percentage of women is more than that of men. The percentage of illiterate women is also more than that of men. Regarding the decision making power of women, in rural Barak valley women mostly have low degree and moderate degree of autonomy while in some areas of urban Barak Valley women have more high degree than low and medium degree of autonomy. It is also observed that women are mainly involved in household decision makings like purchase of daily household needs, visits to relatives, sons’ and daughters’ marriages; while in decisions like major household needs, family planning and children’s education, women’s involvements are very poor. Regarding freedom of going inside and outside the locality, most of the women have the autonomy to go within the residential area alone while there is a difference between the rural women and urban women in the autonomy to go outside the locality alone. Most of the rural women have the freedom
to go inside the locality alone while very few of them have the freedom to go outside the locality alone. The urban women enjoy more freedom in this regard. Mostly, women are accessing money only for small purchase in the Barak Valley and in this regard urban women are slightly in better position compared to rural women. Moreover, the percentage of women having bank accounts and accessing facilities is very poor in rural areas compared to that of the urban areas.

Along with socio-economic dimension, political dimension is also important in women empowerment. In both the rural and urban areas, direct political participation of women in the election forming local government is very low and there is a wide gap in comparison to that of the participation of men in case of unreserved seats. Most of the women have no self-choice opinion poll; their voting choice is completely guided by the male members of their family. The situation is worst in the Hailakandi district compared to the other districts in Barak Valley. There is a huge disparity between rural and urban women in measuring gender empowerment.

Therefore, it is finally concluded that the overall socio, economic and political status of the women is not impressive in all respect in Barak Valley. However, the status of urban women is slightly better in all respect compared to that of rural women.

Women in Barak Valley are facing various types of problems. In this study the problems are categorized mainly into five types. Majority of the women in Barak Valley are not free from other family obligations though they are employed. Further, most of the women do not have the freedom to save or spend from their own earnings. Only a few employed women have some autonomy to save or spend a small amount of their earnings. Women do not have the freedom to cast their votes according to their own choice. It is observed that women are willing to study but they are not having educational freedom especially in rural areas. The rural women do not get support from their family while the urban women get more
support from their family in terms of their further study and as a result of this the educational status of the rural women are very poor. Domestic violence is another important problem that women are facing. It has been observed that a greater percentage of the rural respondents in Barak Valley are either physically or domestically humiliated by their husbands or other family members than the urban women.

Therefore, it is concluded that poor socio-economic status of women is due to the problem of male dominance in all respect especially in the rural area of Barak valley.

Women Empowerment Index (WEI) has been constructed through Principal Component analysis by using 22 socio-economic and political indicators. From this WEI, it is concluded that women belonging to urban areas highly empowered than that of the rural areas. Among the rural areas of Barak Valley, the situation of Hailakandi district is better while the condition of rural women empowerment in Cachar district is very poor.

The socio-economic and political status of the women belonging to rural and urban areas is different. Due to the different socio-economic set up of these areas, there are huge disparities in their empowerment. The educational status of urban women is far better than that of the rural women. The percentage of illiterate women in all these three districts of Barak Valley is more in rural areas than in urban areas. The percentage of women in primary level of education is also more in rural areas than in urban areas while in case of higher studies like Graduation and Post-Graduation, the percentage of urban women is more than the rural women. This shows that urban women are more advanced than rural women in terms of educational aspect. There is also a difference in the degree of autonomy between the rural and urban women for taking decision in the family. The urban women have a high degree of autonomy in taking decision regarding different family related matters such as daily household needs, son and daughter’s education etc. than that of the rural women.
It is also observed that the percentage of urban women, having more freedom, is greater than that of rural women in case of moving within the locality as well as outside the locality alone. Regarding disparities in occupational pattern, it is observed that rural women are more employed in ‘daily salaried’, ‘small scale self businesses’ and ‘monthly salaried (unorganized)’ while urban women are more engaged in ‘govt. school / college’, ‘private school’, ‘large scale self businesses, ‘govt. office’ and ‘private sector’. There are no rural women employed in private sector and a very few of them are employed in govt. offices. Further, urban women have far more access to money than the rural women in all these three districts. Regarding savings and investments, the percentage of urban women is much more than the rural women. Rural women invest mainly on LIC, recurring deposit and fixed deposit but in all cases the rate of savings and percentage of urban women are more than the rural women except ‘recurring deposit’ case. Though the involvement of urban women in politics is more than that of the rural women but in this case the disparity is less than in other fields. Therefore, it is concluded that in all these three above dimensions urban women are more empowered compared to rural women.

Regarding the fifth objective it is observed that women empowerment and economic development are highly related to each other. They have a bi-causal relationship. If women empowerment increases then economic development increases by approximately 85 per cent and again if economic development increases then women empowerment increases by approximately 92 per cent. From the Chow test, it is observed that the test is significant which implies there is a variation in the impact of women empowerment on economic development between rural and urban area. Therefore, economic development will increase more in rural area than urban area due to an increase in women empowerment. So, the rural economic development will be at higher rate than the urban area. The case is different in case of impact of economic development on women empowerment. In this case women
empowerment will increase more in urban area than rural area due to an increase in economic
development. So, the urban women empowerment will be at higher rate than the rural area
because already it is observed that urban women are more empowered than rural women in
Barak Valley.

Though there are various programmes and policies for empowerment of women taken
up by the government at the national level but all of them are not yet implemented in Barak
Valley. Very few NGOs like Wodwichee, Roghurtook Club & Library, Nivedita Nari
Sangstha etc. have come forward to implement some of them in the three districts of Barak
Valley. Some of the schemes which have been implemented in Barak Valley are Swadhar
Shelter Home and Helpline, Short Stay Home, Support to Training and Employment Project
(STEP), Integrated Project for rural women artisan SHGs, Readymade Garments Training
Cum Production Centre, Training on Food Processing, Leadership Development of Women
in the Minority Areas, Training Centre on Improved Weaving, Craft Training Centre for
Minorities, Family Counselling Centre, Working Women’s Hostel, Programme on Domestic
Violence, Continuing Education Centre, Training and Support Project for rural women, Rajib
Gandhi National Creche, Multi-facility Care centre for aged widowed women and Coconut
Coir Making Training centre for Scheduled Caste Women. Moreover, it is observed that the
employment of women under MNREGA in these three districts have decreased over the years
and it is surprising that none of the employed women under MNREGA are getting 100 days
work in any of the work categories.

7.3 Suggestions:

As it is already found that the socio-economic condition as well as the women
empowerment status is low in Barak Valley due to the poor implementation of government
policies, lack of awareness and male dominance, so, the following suggestions can be framed
on the basis of the findings and conclusion of this study.
Though Government policies are implemented in Barak Valley through a few NGOs and organizations but these are not sufficient to improve the status of women. So, more organisations should take initiatives and come forward to implement these different government schemes.

Due to lack of proper monitoring, different schemes are not yet successfully implemented. So, there should be proper monitoring of these schemes which can improve the status of women empowerment in Barak Valley.

As the educational status of the women especially in the rural area is very poor, an awareness campaign programme on this aspect in the locality should be intensified. In that case some incentive schemes such as Kanyashree, job opportunity etc. can increase the willingness and level of education which can improve the status of women.

Women Reservation Bill can step up women’s position in the society; though till now it has not been passed. In this respect all political parties should come forward to pass the Women Reservation Bill in the Parliament to protect women’s position.

An awareness campaign programme in the society is required to stop early marriages of women. In this regard society should come forward with positive frame of mind that women are not the liability in the society. A morally strong and empowered mother is the root of well developed society. Some programs should be developed to make the women to be morally strong. Moreover, the number of Family Counselling Centres should be increased and women should be motivated to approach those centres.

Women, especially belonging to rural areas should be made aware about the various rights and facilities of the women so that women can be more empowered.

Most of the women are allowed to involve in SHGs only for loan purpose but they do not have any control on the money. The main motives of SHGs are to build the confidence of
the women and making women economically strong; but these are not actually happening in real sense. So, there should be proper monitoring of the SHGs from time to time.

7.4 Limitations and Scope of Further Research:

Though the study highlights many aspects but there are some limitations which are discussed in the following for pursuing further research in this field:

- For measuring GDI, social and economic dimensions have been considered. Under social dimension, a Social index has been constructed by taking literacy aspect only. Health dimension is avoided due to the non-availability of data on Body Mass Index (BMI) for men though BMI data have been collected from women. But for measuring Equality Distributed index the data is required for both male and female. During the field survey only women respondents were present because men’s presence were not likely due to some confidential questions related to family humiliation, domestic violence, decision making etc.

- For political dimension, the district level (aggregative data) three tiers Panchayat data are available but village-wise disaggregated election data is not available. The data of Panchayat election 2009 and data on number of contestant of Municipal election 2009 are not available for Hailakandi district.

- The number of common problems faced by the women is considered on five aspects. But, it is observed that apart from these problems there are several other problems that women are facing but these are not considered as they are heterogeneous in nature. It can be incorporated.

- For regression analysis, only two variable classical linear regressions have been considered to check the interrelationship between economic development and women empowerment. Though multiple regressions can be done by considering other exogenous variables but in that case the strength of interrelationship would be lesser.
References:


