Abstract

Women’s empowerment is a process of change that involves a growing ability to make choices that affect a woman’s wellbeing, life path, and her capacity for self-determination (Jejeebhoy and Sathar 688; Malhotra, Shuler, and Bowender 5). Definitions of women empowerment include control over assets (Goetz and Sen Gupta 48-50); women’s relative physical mobility, economic security, freedom from domination, political and legal awareness and participation in public protests and political campaigns (Hashemi et al. 638-39; develop capacity to reduce socio economic vulnerability and dependency (Banu 31; Mustafa et al. 302); opportunity to generate income and control over income (Varghese 37); and participation in household decision-making (Mizanur et.al. 123; Kabeer et.al.10). Women empowerment is a multi dimensional process. Its aim is to enable women or a group of women to realize their full identity and power in all spheres of life. It consists of greater access to knowledge and resources, greater autonomy in decision making to enable them to have greater ability to plan their lives. The World Bank has identified empowerment as one of the key constituent elements of poverty reduction, and as a primary development assistance goal. The Bank has also made gender mainstreaming a priority in development assistance, and the promotion of women’s empowerment as a development goal (Malhotra at. el. 3).

Women empowerment is not only greater external control but also growing inner capability as greater self confidence and inner transformation of one’s consciousness that enable one to overcome external barriers to access resources and changing the traditional ideology for social, economic and political development of women (Ahmed 347).

Many factors such as educational level, micro finance, formation of Self Help Groups etc. can enhance women empowerment. Tourism is also an area where women can work for their economic empowerment. The Tourism industry has witnessed an unprecedented growth in recent years. Bezbaruah (124-25), suggested that tourism can be a tool to fight the biggest challenge of today, poverty. As the world’s largest employer with 231million employees generating 10.4% of the world GDP, the tourism
industry is rapidly expanding and is estimated to employ approximately 269.5 million people by the year 2015 (World Tourism & Travel Council). It may provide avenue for women employment and participation. According to Ghodsee (1) tourism is a labour intensive industry and tends to employ many economically disadvantaged groups, such as, women and ethnic minorities.

The UN World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) declared the theme of World Tourism Day for the year 2007 as 'Tourism Opens Doors for Women'. UNWTO Secretary General Francesco Frangialli’s message for the Day reflected the positive note of the theme with an affirmative statement that 'Tourism is a sector of the economy that not only employs significant numbers of women, but provides enormous opportunities for their advancement’. UNWTO and UNIFEM (now UN Women) have signed the initial cooperation agreement in 2008. The aim of which was to harness tourism’s potentials to contribute to gender equality and women’s empowerment (UNWTO). Worldwide, tourism is particularly important sector for women; they make up to 46% of the tourism labour force. This percentage is higher than in the workforce in general, where 34-40% are women (Vagus and Aguilar).

There are many studies on women and the tourism industry both at international and national levels. However, studies reconciling demand of tourists and supply are not available. Furthermore, studies with respect to the North East India in general and Assam in particular are almost non-existent. To find out the scope of improving economic empowerment of women through such activities and develop a sustainable livelihood method, this study is proposed with the following objectives.

1. To study the current socio-economic status of the women in the study area.
2. To find out the level of involvement of women in tourism related activities in the study area.
3. To study the relationship between involvements of women in tourism related activities and their socio-economic status.
4. To formulate strategies for economic empowerment of women through tourism related activities.

A multistage methodology was followed in the study. Women Survey was conducted in 10 sample villages surrounding Kaziranga National Park for finding out the
socioeconomic status of local women and their perception about tourism. Tourists Survey helped to find out the opinion, preference and buying interests of tourists about various tourism services, souvenir and consumable items in Kaziranga National Park area. Thirdly, Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) for women for determining existing skills of local women. Stakeholder Analysis was done for finding out avenues for women to get involved in TRA in the study area. The next step was formulation of strategies for Economic Empowerment (EE) of women through TRA. Suggestions by stakeholders, Skills of local women and demand of tourists were synthesized to formulate strategies for local women to enter in TRA. Final stage was the practicability study of the formulated strategies. Formulated strategies were tested by expert opinion survey for practicability.

Results of the study showed that more than half (60.8%) women fall under Low Socio Economic Status (SES), 38.1% are in middle SES and only 1.1% fall in high SES group. The SES of women in the study area is studied according to different demographic variables such as age, locality, caste, community and religion. Women from the villages of Golaghat district and the villages in the periphery of Kohora range of KNP have the highest SES. Hindu Assamese women belonging to OBC caste revealed higher SES irrespective of their age.

Women survey revealed that only 23.6% of women are involved in TRA in study area. This percentage is very low in comparison to the Global figure, which is 46% (Sherpa 5-6). Assamese Hindu OBC women belonging to villages of Golaghat district surrounding Kohora Range of KNP have highest involvement irrespective of their Age.

The above results showed that Assamese Hindu women belonging to 'Other Backward Class' from villages of Golaghat district that are located in the periphery of Kohora range of KNP have higher SES scores and also are highly involved in TRA in the study area. Independent sample ‘t’ tests was done to find out statistical significance. Results showed that there is a statistically significant (p=.000) difference in SES score of women and their involvement in TRA.

The results of perception about tourism and women empowerment showed that, OBC Hindu women of Assamese community belonging to villages of Golaghat district surrounding Kohora range of KNP have significantly higher positive perception about
tourism and women empowerment. PRA results showed that 844 women are skilled in weaving and 472 women have expertise in cooking traditional food. Apart from weaving and cooking a number of village women are expert in embroidery, knitting, crocheting, cutting and tailoring. Few women are trained in beautician course, decorative item making, jute work and bamboo work, singing and tour guidance.

Tourists buying interests of all the services, souvenir and consumable items are positive and all scores lie within 0.20 to 1.18. Traditional food, cultural programme, traditional crafts, visit to tea gardens, visit to Assamese tribal village, visit to Assamese non-tribal village and local fruits and vegetables got highest interest scores. Exhibition of traditional loom, service of tour guide, home stay and availability of local condiments and spices and traditional clothing got medium interests value and lowest interests were shown to traditional ornaments, herbal medicine and packaged traditional processed food.

Stakeholders suggested different areas of tourism where local women can join in TRA for their economic empowerment. After the process of strategy formulation and practicability study training, finance and infrastructure facilities were suggested in various areas of tourism. Following areas of tourism were considered for entry of local women for their economic empowerment- Gastronomy, Local Cultural Programme, Souvenir, Visit to tea garden, Visit to Assamese tribal and non tribal village, Local fruits and vegetables, Transport and guidance sector, Accommodation and Basic amenities for tourists.

For economic empowerment of women, only tangible inputs are not sufficient, some intangible inputs in the form of sensitization motivation and awareness are essential to bring women to the forefront of tourism industry. To begin the process of empowerment, proper motivation among the target group is required. To generate motivation among the rural women Government and Non Government Organizations can take up various activities for sensitization, creation of awareness and motivation (SAM) regarding TRA. For that purpose, they can take help from the group of local women that has been identified during the study as having highest involvement in tourism and scoring highest SES score. It has also been found during the study that this particular group has the most positive perception regarding tourism and women empowerment.