Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION
1.1 NATURE OF THE PROBLEM

Recent years have witnessed an increase in the discourse on women be it in economics, literature, science, politics, sociology and through the course of various studies, it is now evident that women is identified as distinctly different from men not only in terms of biological differences but also in essence and understanding. Women are understood to have been given a form and image through the imagination of men (Bagchi, 1995). The role and function of women is governed by patriarchal powers. Therefore, the very construction of women is gendered and is identified as being subservient to men. Ortner (1974) argues that the only way to explain why the value universally assigned to women and their activities is lower than that
assigned to men and their pursuits is that women are 'a symbol' of all 'that every culture defines as being of a lower order of existence of itself'. Beneria (1978) points out that sex roles are subject to change and need not always be viewed as "natural" or "given". The 'sexual division of labour' is only a reasonable understanding and compatible arrangement between consenting adults – men as the provider, and women the nurturer, no force is involved Banerjee, (1995a). However, this segregation of roles on the basis of gender has been not only with respect to the social construction of women, but is also explicit in various kinds of work that both men and women perform. A comparison with the nature of work of both the sexes reveals that women have not been able to catch up with men in terms of employment, share of wages, time devoted to work. We use the terms 'catch up' so as to emphasize the point that, in spite of their efficiency, productivity, capability, women have been denied equal footing with men in terms of equal pay, remuneration, decision making authority and status. Exclusion of women from these rights only retard the progress and development of nation because it is, by now, universally accepted that women workers constitute a meaningful category and their participation along with men constitute the total labour force in the economy.

Experience of developed as well as developing nations reveal that fruits of economic growth have not only failed to trickle down to men and women alike, but has instead further widened the gender
gap. In the economic sphere, there is gross under valuation of women’s contribution and also absence of recognition of their contribution. Women in every nation work for considerably longer hours than men folk, but major portion of their work remain unpaid or under paid in contrast to their male counterparts. Since the income earned by an individual is an important determinant of a person’s economic status, a women deprived of these legitimate rights often suffers from low economic status, which in turn gives rise to low sociological, political, and psychological status in the society. Legal discrimination against women is another most blatant form of discrimination, which a woman is often subjected to. And most of these various forms of discrimination arise directly from low economic status of women.

All these disturbing features have necessitated evolvement of a new branch of study in social studies popularly known as Women’s Studies. ‘Women’s Studies provide the theoretical basis for the women’s movement and the socio-political context for gender politics’ (Grewal & Johnston, 1994). Research relating to women’s studies should not be misunderstood as being confined only to the domain of a women dealing only with women and their welfare. On the other hand studies and research relating to women’s studies should be viewed from the overall development of a nation. Women’s studies deal with problems of women and changing the attitude of all people in the society particularly men, towards the necessity of ensuring
equal opportunities and participation of women for the progress of not only the women herself but even for the man himself. In the words of Mazumder (1989), function of women's studies is "to discover, acquire and accumulate knowledge about women so that all of us, not just women, can perhaps start looking at human beings and societies in a different way". Women's studies are also described as, "studying women with a women's perspective", "a balanced understanding of women's reality" or "a critical understanding of women's contribution to the social process". Feminist scholars have argued that gender and gendered relations are useful to human studies because it enables them to look at women from the angle of the multifarious role they play, yet remain suppressed and oppressed in various forms.

1.1.1 Women's work participation rate (WPR) and its relative significance

Entire economic function and activity is related to the process of production, consumption, distribution and exchange. The individual performs the dual role of a producer and consumer, which is again manifested in his additional role of distributing and exchanging what he produces so as to generate income and to sustain economic activity. But both the activities of being a producer and a consumer are intimately related. For e.g., the necessity to consume more and thereby to improve the standard of living increases the volume of goods and services, which are produced in the economy. This again
is dependant on the quantity and quality of the labour force participating in economically productive occupation. While the former is indicated by the number of persons who are economically active that is the number of person in the labour force, the latter is reflected in the quality and quantity of skills, productive abilities, motivation and efficiency to work, knowledge acquired and desire to work of the labour force (Mitra, 1999a).

While considering the first aspect of participation, it could be shown that throughout the historical development both men and women have been equal participants in various forms of productive activities. But the relative participation in 'economic activities' have always been different among the sexes and also have been showing different trend of activities varying from one region to another as well varying from time to time. Even at the primitive stage of family autarky there existed a very convenient form of division of labour, which was primarily based on age and sex. It was observed that there were certain tasks, which was the exclusive responsibility of man, whereas the women solely performed certain other tasks. Anthropologist refers to the sex roles performed even within the earliest society. While both men and women shared the home, it was the exclusive responsibility of the men to earn bread while it was the duty of the women to prepare it. A common string which ran through all these societies was that these divisions of sex roles were decided within the existing patriarchal set up and women had little or no say in the fixation of
their work. Woman’s subsequent role in this patriarchal set up, enshrined in India took the final form around the 2nd to 3rd centuries. Boserup (1970a) strongly supported the contention that preparation of food was the monopoly of women in nearly all communities but she strongly objects to the view that it was entirely a man’s prerogative. In her study, it is revealed that there existed not always a common pattern of sex roles across societies and contrary to the traditional view, women were also engaged in productive activities.

1.1.2 Situation In India

In India, the situation is far worse than many other nations. In India, the patriarchal ideologies have always governed women in socializing and construction of women as a highly flexible resource of the household. Depending on the needs and requirements of the household a woman needs to oscillate between wide varieties of tasks whether productive or reproductive. According to Banerjee (1995a), such patriarchal ideology dictates the chastity and purity of women as an essential component of her socializing process. The ideologies such as chastity, universal early marriage, and frequent motherhood prevent women from entering the labour market and in situations where they do, it is by compulsive economic condition like poverty and deprivation. While the economic necessity and the need for supplementing family income could be the major factors for women to enter the labour market, though economic transformation could also
be cited to constitute an equally important reason (Usha, 1981). In the course of economic development, industrial progress and technological advancement, society gradually has transformed itself from a self-subsistence economy to that of a market economy. With economic development, man began to move from the so-called 'traditional sector' to that of modern sector, which was more capital intensive. This however was not restricted to men-folk alone. The impact of development was also felt among the women moving from the traditional sectors where they worked mainly for the household to that of paid work. This increased the participation of women workforce in the labour market.

It is by now unanimously accepted that women play an important role in the economic development of a nation. The development of an economy can not only be measured in terms of GDP, per capita income and wage but it needs to be seen also in terms of effective participation and utilization of the capabilities of both men and women as an effective human resource potential. In this context, the economic role of women cannot be isolated from the total framework of development. Equal participation of women is a pre-condition for the development of not only the women but also the country as a whole. Emancipation of women, their equality with men are impossible as long as women are excluded from economic productive work and confined to work involving only child bearing, rearing and supervision of the household. The existence of the
concept of inequality of the sexes requires that in the present context we rescue the notion of gender from its ritualistic incantations and make it effectively work for a more emancipatory and inclusive social order (John, 1996).

In recent years with increasing awareness among women, and with the spread of education and an increasing desire to break from the private domain, women are entering more and more into the public sphere. This has raised various arguments.

One argument, which has emerged in the course of development, is that women's entry in the paid sector of the labour market has contributed towards depriving the existing men folk of their legitimate and rightful opportunities to work and earn. This argument cannot be ignored since statistics depict that large unemployment prevails among the men folk. The advantage, which some families would derive from the employment of women, would be offset by a corresponding loss to other families whose household male member would be deprived of jobs if women are accommodated in the paid sectors. This argument holds significant relevance for a developing economy like India where on the one hand, it is characterized by excess labour force i.e. a large supply of labour and on the other is equally characterized by large scale unemployment (Mitra, 1999a). The subsistence sector, with the largest concentration of population serving the rural economy is handicapped by slow growth of expansion opportunities. The urban sector on the other hand with
modernized technology, expanding market and an ever-increasing demand for job opportunity attract a large chunk of population to move into the cities and towns for better paid work. This leads to a continuous flow of internal migrants, which create a recurring existence of overburdened urban sector with very minimum scope for additional employment. Hence, a large section of men folk remain idle and do not contribute to the GDP of the nation. It is in this context, that it is argued that women’s participation in economic activity and their being paid in monetary terms would leave a large section of the men seeking work.

However, some point out that there is a distinct biasness in such an argument. They support their claim by stating that women have been seen as competitors with men only for unskilled, underpaid jobs involving less status. Effective harnessing of women in the agricultural and urban sectors should not be seen as a threat to the employment of man but on the other hand their involvement in the workforce could generate additional output in the form of increased exportable surplus to generate income and thereby create a chain of economic activities resulting in more employment opportunities for man (Boserup, 1970a; Sharma 1993a).

A study sponsored by the World Bank on gender and poverty in India (Bennett, 1990) has shown that the construction of sex role or gender in India is closely connected with the concept of ‘Inside Domain’ and ‘Outside Domain’. The inside domain associates with the
construction of women within the home and the court yard where the family is looked after, whereas the outside domain is reserved for men to be economically, socially and politically liberated and independent.

In spite of these various arguments raised against women's work outside for paid wages and employment, women have not restricted themselves but are venturing out in increasing numbers. Reasons may be many and varied such as better earning opportunities, changes in the concept and attitude towards work, economic independence etc. In spite of this changed perception women experience a sharp discrimination in the occupational distributional pattern of job and lower earnings relative to men for the same nature of job (Embree, 1950).

1.1.3 Existence of discrimination

Research studies have demonstrated a universal fact that there exists a wide gap in the earnings of men and women though the technique, methodologies and sample data have been different, yet it is an unanimous agreement among all studies that wage discrimination does exist. Although overt wage discrimination is illegal yet most employers discriminate by segregating jobs or by offering less training and skill to economic workers and justifying their low wages. The I.L.O. report (1943) states that partly on account of the long standing traditions, social customs and preconceived notion that women are inferior to man in respect to their average outturn, and partly due to their shorter experience and inferior
vocational training which in turn, lessens the demand for female labour when demand and supply have free play in the employment market. (Sic)

Denial of rights have also led women to work for low wages, to be dependent on the male bread earner and to be dependent earners rather to be an independent or self dependent worker. This as feminist economists argue are the limitations chained to women within the walls of patriarchal ideology which establishes that through such denial process, women are self convinced to work as marginal and dependent workers (Agarwal, 1995). This sort of social interaction has several adverse effects on women's work, which in the long run affects the productivity of a woman worker. Denial of right seriously lessens the material foundation on which women can essentially operate as productive economic agent (Banerjee, 1995a).

Productivity of a women to generate income is closely related to the amount of space allocated to her to operate independently as an economic agent. In majority of cases though it is observed that this allocated space is very much restricted as women are considered to be a flexible resource in the work participation process. This hypothesis is based on the ground reality that in majority of the households, investment in women in the form of training, education for any particular skill or field of operation is considered to be either wasteful or is ignored. As a result women are treated as a flexible resource adaptable reserve for any numerous jobs that are allocated to them. This perhaps could be one of the reasons why women labour
supply is more intimately connected to their own family income levels than to wage rate in their jobs. This widespread discrimination has led feminist concern to claim for equal pay for man and women workers. But this demand, as some researchers believe, increases the cost of employing women workers and therefore male workers are replacing them. The existence of discriminated wages with regard to women is explained on the ground that women have less vocational training and less employment unlike man for the same occupation (Atmanand, 1990).

Moreover the application of the principle of equal pay for equal work raises some tricky questions and it is difficult to solve them. The wage paid to women is determined not by economic criteria but is a result of the cultural attitudes and practices and power structure in a society (Sunder 1981).

Apart from wage discrimination which exists in the labour market, there also exist a wide gap between what women contribute to the economy and the remuneration they receive even when women perform the same work as men. They receive less pay, almost 30 to 40% less than men on average, world wide.

1.2 GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN THE LABOUR MARKET: A GENERAL DISCUSSION ON THE REAL LIFE SITUATION

Gender studies and feminist critics point out that the employment of women is largely governed by the stage of economic
development of the society. In an agriculture dominated economy, e.g., it is found that while women and men jointly work together in the family farm but with improvement in the living conditions and a rise in the standard of living, it is the women, who by societal prerequisite opt out of work and thus their participation in economic activity declines. This is significant as men continue to work and are not displaced from the work force while women are deprived from their right to earn, adding to it the related factors of a sense of deprivation and a loss of income and most importantly being considered as a flexible form of human resource that can respond to any contingency such as marriage, child birth, geographical mobility etc. (Mitra, 1997).

In recent years, globalisation has also utilized women as a flexible resource to generate employment and income. The 1999 World Survey on the Role of Woman in the Development brought out by the U.N. says that the gender impact on the globalisation of the world of work is actually mixed. It has no doubt opened up new vistas of employment opportunities, which have led to an increase in the share of female employment and wages. The indirect effect of this has been an improvement in the consumer market, purchasing capabilities of their families along with a rise in their status and self esteem. "While the new opportunities of employment are potentially empowering for women, the forces of economic volatility, job insecurity and loss of livelihood which have been inimical to gender equality have also been unleashed" (The Times of India, 23rd
Oct. 1999). The UN report findings observe that women employment has risen in almost all parts of the world leading to a substantial growth in overall employment in recent years. But the most striking feature of the report adds that though women have been incorporated into the paid sector in large numbers, the conditions of employment of women are much lower for women than men. The report further mentions that the process of induction of women force into paid employment have generated precarious form of employment. It thus follows that globalisation along with increase in numbers into the employment sector has simultaneously changed the pattern of employment where "irregular" conditions once associated with secondary employment have become more widespread for both the sexes (Indian Labour Journal, 1999).

On the economic front, it is thus clear that in spite of rapid globalisation and liberalization and creation of more jobs, women's equality has not necessarily been ensured. According to N. T. Thap (1973),

there can never be equality between exploiter and exploited. When the oppressing class still dominates, the true equal rights of women cannot exist.

With renewed growth of capitalism and economies opening up and more effective control over productive resources, have led many women to free themselves from male domination and offer their 'Labour Power' (a term used by Marx).
In recent years economies are opening up and have started expanding its industrial horizon. There has been a tremendous flow of women workers in almost all countries and especially in the Asian economies of South East Asia and East Asia where women constitute upto 40% or more of the industrial work force. In 1994 the distribution of female labour force showed considerable involvement of women in the industrial sector in Hong Kong/China (56%) and Singapore (42%); less so in Japan and the Republic of Korea where 28% of the female labour force was in the industrial sector as compared to men (38%). The interesting fact however is that the majority of these women are very young workers with limited knowledge and those who could be employed at lower wages (ESCAP, 1998). It has also been observed that in such a situation there exists no positive relationship between education and employment. But with countries gaining industrialized status many of these women workers have been vulnerable to displacement because of a lack of relevant skills and sufficient educational competency as compared to their male counterparts.

As regards the occupational distribution of women workers, almost 30% women are employed as professional and technical workers in many Asian and Pacific countries except in Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan. Women are also under-represented among the administrators and managers in almost all ESCAP countries except high income generating economy. Only 5% women workers are represented in India as managers and Administrators whereas
according to the ‘World Women’s 1995’ in Japan the ratio is 9 women to every 100 men in administrative and managerial jobs.

In agriculture, the impact of modern technology and shift from subsistence to cash cropping have largely benefited men, while increasing women’s work within the family and leading to a rise in the number of casual labourers (Boserup, 1970a).

Structural technology and state policies have not been able to deal with these issues in a constructive manner. Computer technology is currently extending the range of paid work done at home. Women’s participation in the paid labour force has shown fluctuations along with social and economic changes using them as reserve army of labour. Supply and demand factors have led to an increase in women’s participation in the capitalist world in the last 50 years, but often in part time and casualised employment its range varying between countries and their policy changes. Technological changes also brought into existence ‘dual earner household’ which has almost become a necessity and along with it ‘double burden’ on women increased. This has also resulted in more disillusions with women working longer hours in total than men and labour saving devices having little impact on the total hours worked by women (Szalai, 1975).

The 4th World Congress (1970), in its studies prepared for the seminar on “The Changing Roles of Women in Rural Societies” concluded that due to the process of modernization, industrialization,
agriculture mechanization and technological advance, women are severely affected from a sudden loss of economic authority and employment security which in overall affect their status in the society (Kumar, 1995). Feminist economists argue that the very construction of structural adjustment ignores gender skills. Capitalism through structural reforms has used new technologies to exploit gender differences in the labour market through persistent segregation as secondary (unskilled) workers with relatively low income and substituted women for higher paid men. The long-term effect of such a change is low operational cost and displacement of women through feminization of women work force (Banerjee, 1999).

The birth of capitalism as an organized form of production has also seen the emergence of a labour market, which has not been free from discrimination and exploitation. Capitalism progressed germinating the seeds of discriminatory wages and power. In course of time, socialist economies have made a strong effort to reduce the imperfection but have not been successful in eliminating it (Molyneux, 1999). This form of unequal treatment is still evident and exists in its most blatant form cutting across gender relations even in the most present state of welfare capitalism. (Deshpande and Deshpande, 1999).

Gender discrimination in wages and pay are widespread through Asia. In most of these countries of East, South East and South Asia, men are often employed as regular workers with job
security and benefits in technical and managerial jobs while women are confined to the production lines as hired or contract workers with the constant fear of being thrown out of employment and working under poor working conditions (Committee for Asian Women, 1995). In the manufacturing and service sector of South Asia, females have been found to remain predominantly in the lower categories of the job hierarchy. This has also led to women earning lower wages than men and this differential in wages is much higher in Asia than other parts of the developing world (Ghosh, 1995).

1.2.1 Discrimination in India

In India, discrimination in the labour force exists in various forms: discriminatory wages, occupational segregation, human capital discrimination and so on. In spite of these discriminatory structures, which operate in the labour market, women's entry in the paid labour force has increased significantly over the years due to rapid industrialization, structural reforms and an increased desire to better off the standard of living (Usha, 1981). But the increase in female labour force participation has not led to women achieving equal status or bargaining power in the labour market as claimed for. Increases in wages are increasingly being associated with a simultaneous increase in productivity. For example, women's concentration in the services sector has contributed to an overall weakening of their wage bargaining power since increased productivity is not easily measured
in this sector (ICSSR, 1995). A major barrier to equality for women in the market place is also the discrimination in hiring, promotion and wages (Leftwich and Sharp, 1984).

While differentials in male–female unemployment rate reflect employment discrimination and pre-entry human capital discrimination, wage differentials that exist are indicative of discrimination at the work place. A comparison of the private and the public sector indicates that while the wage differentials in the public sector does not exist but it does exist in the private sector (Mitra, 1999a). His study based on personal interviews has examined that, in privately organized manufacturing and service sector, income differentials do exist and though work load comparison between the sexes may not always be accurate, interviews are suggestive of a stronger work pressure on women than men, particularly in jobs with equal income and is much more rampant in the service sector (Mitra, 1999b). Wage or pay discrimination also referred to as direct discrimination is a common feature of the Indian labour market, where wage differential exists between two equally efficient male and female not on the basis of productivity differences but on the basis of sex. Though various theories and models such as the institutional theory and the monopsony model have been constructed to explain the plausible causes of pay discrimination. Prevalence of sex segregation has been the principal explanatory factor explaining this behaviour. In
the words of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (ICSSR, 1975)

wage discrimination is reinforced by the feminization of particular jobs, generally at the lower unskilled levels of the productive process with low rates of wages.

Occupational segregation takes two forms viz. horizontal segregation and vertical segregation. Several studies have identified a positive correlation between the level of occupational segregation size of modern activities and diversification of activities (Bakker, 1988). In spite of women’s rapid advancement in terms of education and skill, occupational segregation has not really decreased and from the economic point of view, it is certainly considered as inefficiency or market failure since the potentialities and capabilities of female human capital are not being optimally allocated according to their productive potential (Rothboeck and Acharya, 1999). Bergman (1973) points out that the economic results of occupational segregation for women are low wages and are relegated to positions where productivity and experience have little implications on their status as they advance in age.

An essential pre-requisite of women in the labour market is her being a flexible resource adaptable to various changes. She is definitely considered as an economic agent and a participant in economic activity. Yet women are never trained nor made specialized or aware of a particular skill or job but is always seen as a supplementary factor of production. Her work therefore is always
considered peripheral. And according to Kalpagam (1997) this assumption about the malleability and flexibility of labour is particularly detrimental to women’s work. Again Rojas (1977) explains that wage discrimination is due to the fact that there is a common accepted notion that men are more efficient than women and women’s income is only a supplementary earning while men are considered as principal earners.

1.2.2 Deficiencies in promotional measures to minimize discrimination

In recent years with an emphasis to empower women, various activities are being promoted to generate self-employment among women. But even with regard to self-employed incomes, it becomes difficult to distinguish the women component of most of these activities, as most of it falls under household activity, which do not enter the market. The same is not specific for men because a majority of their products is marketed and calculated (Unni, 2001). Though the share of self-employed workers has increased in recent years, men have been capable of investing and venturing into own business while women who constitute a sizeable proportion of the workers are usually engaged as co-workers and have no independent control over matters related to decision making (Banerjee, 1999). And again through the help of various social activists and NGOs, working conditions in various informal sectors have been formalized. But when
it comes to the task of assessing the work of women it is observed that a large proportion of women's work is concentrated in jobs involving minimum scope for improvement with low pay and status as compared to men. (Eapen, 2001).

In recent years, an interesting trend that has affected the mental attitude of many rising unemployed men is that "too much emancipation of women" have brought along with it social problems, family discord and growing unemployment among men. A growing number of men feel much of these social tensions could be eased if women resort to their traditional roles as being a good mother and a good wife. In this context feminists argue that patriarchal measures, such as extended maternity leave and early retirement have been introduced to encourage women to stay at home. As a result, there is little sensitivity to women's issues and to growing "feminization of unemployment" (Commission on the status of women, 1995).

Numerous studies point out to the fact that structural reforms and liberalisation policies are often distributed disproportionately, so that women are forced to bear a greater share of the burden. Although trade liberalization in the developing countries has led to a steep increase in the participation of women in the export oriented industries, providing them with new opportunities and challenges but the quality of most of these jobs were poor and insecure. Women were paid only a fraction of male wage for the same nature of work and lacked social protection (Henshall, 1991). Simultaneously it
cannot be denied that there exists a strong positive relationship between economic growth and economic advancement of women.

Overall it could be summarized that, though the participation of women has been increasing in recent years, women have a lower employment status than men (Jose, 1987a). Majority of women are concentrated in lower category jobs and this phenomenon is present both in the organized and unorganized sector of the labour market (Rothboeck and Acharya, 1999). While men are found to be employed in primary market jobs, which are characterized by qualified jobs, providing high wages, better working conditions, job security and internal job ladder (Thurow, 1975), in contrast women are employed in secondary job market, which tends to have low benefits and wages, high labour turn over and less job mobility. As a result, women are poorly represented. Casual workers are predominantly women and are hired or paid on a daily wage basis and are not covered by any contract or labour laws (Acharya and Jose, 1991).

Women are known to face several constraints in the labour market such as higher levels of unemployment, longer waiting period to secure a job, sectoral and occupational segregation (Duraisamy and Duraisamy, 1999).

Similarly the unemployment rates among women are consistently higher than men irrespective of how unemployment was defined. It is also evident in NSSO studies between 1983 and 1993-94, where women unemployment has been found to be higher both in
the urban and rural India as compared to men. This also explains the low share of women in labour market and consequently lower employment status than men (Jose, 1987b).

1.3 BRIEF SOCIO-ECONOMIC SCENARIO OF BARAK VALLEY AND THE IDEA ABOUT GENDER DISCRIMINATION THAT EXIST IN THE VALLEY

Barak Valley comprises the three districts of Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj lying in the southern part of Assam with an area of nearly 6922 square kms. Economically, the valley had always been a backward state since the Mughal rule (1918 A.D.). The economic picture of Barak Valley greatly changed after the annexation. This has been mainly with respect to tea industry, cottage industries and agriculture (Chatterjee, 2000a). Annexation helped the people to liberate themselves from their previous confinement and gradually move towards modern lifestyle. After the creation of the Silchar Town in the year 1834 A.D., there was a gradual development of urban livelihood with appointment of various people both men and women in different official posts. The expansion of tea-plantations in various parts of Cachar led to the development of new roads, schools and health centres. This was also partly responsible for the influx of labourers from outside the valley (Biswa, 1998). Though agriculture has always been the main source of livelihood of the people with the fertile lower soil covered with rich crops of mainly rice, the high lands within the valley have been mostly utilized for tea plantation
(Statistical Profile of Barak Valley, 1998). In fact, the first tea garden was started in Surma Valley in 1885 (Dutta Ray, 1978a).

The introduction of the tea industry led to the establishment and creation of employment opportunities of both men and women in paid employment. This has also resulted in large-scale influx of labourers from outside the state where women have entered the work force leading to supplementary earnings for the household (Dutta Ray, 1978b).

Over the years, in Barak Valley, there has been a rapid rise in the total population as well as female population (annual growth rate of population was 1.89% and 1.93% respectively during 1991 census with reference to 1971 census). Sex-Ratio which indicates the number of females per 1000 males, have also increased for all the three districts except the District of Karimganj which has registered a very nominal fall.

All these indicate a healthy trend with no such social taboos and discrimination attached to a girl child and which is also reflective of a positive attitude towards the girl child, which may have developed through an increase in literacy rate in the state. This has however not changed the relative perception towards women in providing equal opportunities in related fields of agriculture and other services. The increase in the proportion of female workers in agriculture and allied activities from 59.6% in 1961 to 77.5% in 1991 census shows that agriculture still occupies a predominant sector of livelihood. Majority
of these workers are engaged as agricultural labourers and few are engaged as cultivators signifying that majority of them work as casual workers with no independent decision making ability and no control over their land.

Report of the employment exchange though provides a hopeful picture of increasing awareness of the people seeking for employment — however does not provide respite in the nature of providing employment opportunities to the growing number of literates and educated turnouts of both male and female population. This also indicates that with the diminishing absorption of people in the government services, the dependency of government jobs is gradually diminishing and this is reflected in the low rate of registration in the employment exchange offices. And even when it does exists; males are always preferred to females in the service sectors.

Apart from the engagement of women in various occupations, women of Barak Valley are also engaged in various household activities, which generate considerable income to the respective households. The folk workmanship of Barak Valley could be divided into two groups, one, that has still retained its traditional structure using age old techniques of craftsmanship and another that has lately introduced modern tools and implements within the household sector. The household sector is dominated by women who participate in various work involving sola craft, bamboo handicrafts, kantha embroidery of intricate designs. In addition to spinning and weaving
within the household, women assist the men-folk in repairing of houses, raising crops like weeding, transplanting, reaping, thrashing and winnowing crops. Veiling or purdah system never existed and therefore the mobility of the women were not restricted in the Valley (Sarma, 1989). Duttapur village of Karimganj was once famous for fine embroidery work where women were traditionally bound not to receive any remuneration for their efforts and were distributed or utilized for use within the family. Therefore marketing of these products or adding a monetary value was never practiced. Thus productivity of the worker was never valued. In recent years this art form has received commercial status and as a result many women have been benefited. In terms of paid work as well as an enhancement in their status (Basu, 2000).

Among the other social communities, the Manipuri women constitute to be very hard work working and enterprising lot of women. Women are engaged in cultivation of cotton and rearing of silks for many decades. The Manipuri women have retained an almost monopoly over their traditional silks of weaving and colourful handloom products (Okram, 1994). In recent past, Manipuri women are also venturing into marketing and selling of their products. Among the Dimachas of the plain area, women specially belonging to the Barman community are very hard working and industrious and thus contribute significantly towards the household by assisting their fathers and other male members in ploughing and cultivation. Within
the home they are expert weavers and are less dependent on the male members and enjoy economic freedom (Chatterjee, 2000b)

But an understanding of these works will certainly reveal that most of these works are small-time works confined within the household and are yet to find sufficient exposure in the market. Overall the macro perspective suggests that there are ample opportunities to find alternative income sources for the women workers specially in the rural sectors of the economy in the form of self-employment schemes and upgradation of traditional crafts.

Though fish trade had always been an important form of economic activity in Barak Valley but women engaged directly or indirectly in this trade have been almost negligible. It is to be noted here that certain foothills of the plains of Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj are covered by forests. They were reserved forests and the law prohibited the human settlement in such forests (Chatterjee, 2000c) Therefore, these forest resources also constituted an important source of livelihood for most tribals and plain people of Barak Valley. But these sectors have not yet developed as an organized form of employment generating sectors, which could gainfully provide employment opportunities to the women folk.

In spite of various forms of activities, women of Barak Valley are yet to see the face of the true form of women emancipation and development. The economy suffers from various infrastructural and development deficiencies. Unemployment is rampant in the Valley
with no simultaneous development or growth of job-generating sectors. Though this concerns both men and women alike, but the problems faced by women are more acute. Therefore, striving towards equality between the sexes is a much 'market compatible approach' and also in consonance with prevalent macro economic policies (Sudarshan, 2001). Thus, women need to be viewed and empowered on an equal footing with men in all spheres of life.

1.4 NECESSITY OF THE WORK (WITH REFERENCE TO MACRO-ECONOMY, MORE IMPORTANTLY WITH RESPECT TO BARAK VALLEY)

To identify the need for studying FWPR (Female Work Participation Rate), we look at the WPR among women in selected countries of Asia. A look at the Table 1.1 and Fig. 1 shows that while the male participation has been more or less uniform varying between 52% and 62% during the period 1980 to 1987 whereas for women, variation has been extreme from country to country ranging from as low as 20% to 50% during the same period with the exception of Pakistan and Bangladesh which depict an extremely low participation possibly due to the influence of their religion. Secondly, in comparison to male work participation rate (MWPR) it is observed that FWPR is always significantly less. When expressed as a percentage of MWPR, FWPR, again with the exception of Pakistan and Bangladesh is in the range of 37.6% to 89.6% with India being at the bottom of the list.
### Table 1.1 Male and Female Work Participation Rate in selected Asian countries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No.</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Participation Rate (%)</th>
<th>FWPR as a % of MWPR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>01</td>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>1984-85</td>
<td>53.8 5.6</td>
<td>10.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>1982</td>
<td>57.3 47.0</td>
<td>82.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03</td>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>61.9 39.6</td>
<td>64.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>04</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>52.7 19.8</td>
<td>37.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>05</td>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>50.7 32.6</td>
<td>64.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>06</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>60.9 39.1</td>
<td>64.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>07</td>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>1980</td>
<td>48.5 25.9</td>
<td>53.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>08</td>
<td>Nepal</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>58.2 32.4</td>
<td>55.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09</td>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>1984-85</td>
<td>51.7 5.8</td>
<td>11.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>59.5 36.3</td>
<td>61.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Sri Lanka</td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>52.7 25.4</td>
<td>48.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>1984</td>
<td>55.9 50.1</td>
<td>89.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Jose (1989)\textsuperscript{1}, pp. 2.

---

![Bar chart](chart.png)

**Fig. 1** Male and Female Work Participation in Selected Asian Countries

- **Male**
- **Female**
Countries of East and South East Asia are marked by a high participation rate as compared to countries in South Asia. This is probably due to comparatively minimum social restrictions and taboos associated with women working outside and also due to high literacy rate in those countries demanding a greater role amongst women in the participatory process (Dreze and Sen, 1995). Bangladesh and Pakistan mark a comparatively low figure than India, which stands at a comparatively better position. Though considerable work has been done to examine the casual factors behind such low participation, but India's position is yet far behind the trend that is observed in other Asian countries and falls short of the progress achieved by some of the industrialized countries with respect to WPR, where female participation in industrialized countries stands to be 51.6% during 1980 among women as compared to 96.2% among male. Though conceptual on measurement factors have been cited to be the main reason behind the low FWPR but disparity in FWPR is a universal phenomena differing only in intensity and magnitude from one country to another. In advance countries, FWPR is on the increase (Gupta, 2000), which indicates that women are gradually being aware of their role and need for effective participation. But for countries like India, this awareness is yet to show its presence. Therefore FWPR needs to be studied to examine the low FWPR with respect to other developed Asian and industrialized economies and also to examine the factors
such as socio cultural and economic perception which control to a large extent the participation rate of females in India.

We now analyse the FWPR with respect to the overall situation of India, Assam and Barak Valley (detailed socio-economic profile of Assam and Barak valley have been discussed in Chapter 4. Table 1.2 shows the FWPR during the period 1971 to 1991.

**Table 1.2  WPR among the females during 1971 – 1991 (in %)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>11.90</td>
<td>3.18</td>
<td>22.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assam</td>
<td>4.66</td>
<td>7.97</td>
<td>21.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barak valley</td>
<td>4.93</td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>11.38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The work force has witnessed a significant change in the ideology structure and nature of jobs and in the number of women willing to join the work force (Papola, 1999). Women's participation in economic activity has increased over the years which has far reaching implications not only in the quality of human resources but also in terms of the level of participation of a working population (Kumar, 1995). This picture is not uncommon for India and the state of Assam and Barak Valley as a whole where there has also been significant growth of FWPR since 1971 to 1991 at the rate of 3.18%, 7.9% and 4.2% respectively. This has been possible due to various factors. Education and general awareness for empowerment and economic independence are perhaps the major contributing factors for
increased FWPR. Nevertheless, the vast majority of Indian women in the work force carry out the traditional domestic chores, agricultural and allied activities which are either unpaid or undervalued. Therefore, the question, which emerges is 'Are these women being marginalised in the process of development?' Data presented in Table 1.3 from the NSS Rounds shows a gradual increase in the percentage of casual workers from 31.4% (1972-73) to 38.7% (1993-94) i.e. a rise of over 23.25% in the three decades in the rural areas as well as a rise of over 9.70% in urban areas for the same periods (23.7% in 1972-73 to 26.0% in 1992-93).

This indicates the following:

i) Women are slowly being (replaced) displaced from their self-employment. The data in table 1.3 indicates that the percentage of self employed workers has also fallen from 64.5% in 1972-73 in the rural areas to 58.5% in 1993-94, and from 48.4% in urban areas to 45.4% for the same period (i.e. during the last three decades).

ii) With the process of sub-contracting gradually entering the production process, workers are found to move from the organized to unorganized sectors enlarging the process of casualisation. The data which shows an increasing trend in later years under study in table 1.3 supports the statement. Similar trend is also observed for the state of Assam.
Table 1.3 Female Employment in India by status (in percentage)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>1972-73</th>
<th>1982-83</th>
<th>1992-93</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>R</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>R</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self Employment</td>
<td>64.5</td>
<td>48.4</td>
<td>62.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular Employment</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>27.9</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casual Wage Labour</td>
<td>31.44</td>
<td>23.7</td>
<td>34.69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The female sex-ratio has been showing to be adverse to women and has been declining over the decades with only a marginal improvement during 1981. Assam as well as Barak valley has shown an increasing trend throughout the entire period. This steady rise in the sex ratio coupled with an increasing literacy rate could be an indicator of the increase in social awareness amongst the people. This coupled with an improvement in the Female Work Participation Rate could harness the full potentiality of women as an important economic category of population.

Thus a study of FWPR assumes utmost importance to understand the implications. First, the increase in the WPR among the females vis-à-vis men and secondly their increased casualisation in the job market. It is clear that with the overall population increasing, FWPR either in Barak Valley, Assam or India as a whole is much lower vis-a-vis MWPR. With the increasing population, combined with poor representation in the total workforce, the unemployment in the female population is found to be alarming. In his study has shown that
though the level of unemployment calculated on the basis of the NSSO Rounds of the three approaches (Appendix 1) declined at an all India level, but the rate of female unemployment exceeded that of males (Jayadevan, 1996).

Marxian theory considers that the value of a commodity is determined by the labour time necessary for its production (Theory of surplus value). This implies that workers irrespective of gender difference have the right to acquire wages, which is equal to the labour time necessary for the production of commodity. But in India, it is observed that majority of women spend almost 18 to 20 hours working, with no equal remuneration attached to their work. In the case of women, job segregation and wage discrimination persists with a big gap between what women produce and what they earn. Thus WPR needs to be studied in the light of these theories.

The change (increase) in female labour force participation (FLFP) has not led to a simultaneous increase in women achieving equal status or bargaining power in the labour market, which is closely related, to increase in productivity. Woman's high concentration in sector involving daily household chores, family farm unit 'and strenuous routine work has contributed to an overall weakening of their wage bargaining power since increased productivity is not easily measured in this sector. National reports have shown that women's earnings are lower than man in most of the reporting countries (Commission on the Status of Women, 1995).
Thus FWPR also needs to be studied in the context of improving the Status of Women which does not necessarily increase only with an increase in the participation rate but along with an increase in the ability to claim wages and to take an active part in the decision making process.

Workforce participation occupies an important place for investigation because it interacts with various demographic variables. For both the sexes, there exist a strong casual relationship between occupation and work states (Fong, 1975) fertility, health, migration and mortality. There is close association between all these factors and the participation rate of women. Therefore, there is a need for studying FWPR in relation to these variables because a women's entry, existence and increased participation in the labour market is related to these factors.

1.5 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objectives of the study is to examine the extent to which the status of women in Assam has improved during the last thirty years. The study aims to investigate the participation rate of women since a woman with a income earning ability particularly higher income is considered to be the owner of improved status in a modern society.

A widespread belief that is prevalent in economics is that the nature, extent and structure of employment in general are purely
determined by economic factors. It is only by controlling such factors that the level of employment can be raised. It is however to be highlighted here that as far as female participation rate is concerned, along with economic factors, socio-economic as well as human development factors other than economic factors also lend a significant contribution towards determining the nature and structure of female participation rate. Consequently pure economic theories on employment may fail to capture the essence of women employment, since factors determining the level of employment may be characterized by additional factors, which fall outside the purview of pure employment theories - an aspect of employment theories, which have received very little attention. Any theory particularly as important as employment theory may fail to capture the empirical reality of the whole economy if it is unable to reflect the problems of one vital section of the economy. The next objective of the study, therefore, is to identify the set of economic as well as sociological factors determining women's participation rate and examine the relative importance of those factors in deciding the structure of female work participation in the labour market. This objective is attempted to be achieved by taking the female work participation as a case study.

Another objective of the study is to take a stock of the female participation rate in labour market in India so as to enable us to grasp the all India situation of the work participation rate. As against this the study shall also aim at making a detailed analysis of the female
employment structure along with its determinants for Barak Valley of the state of Assam and explore the potentialities of the economic power of women in the region and examine their corresponding participation rate as against their male counterparts and review the position of the valley against that of the state as a whole.

1.6 HYPOTHESIS

The hypotheses that has been tested in this study are as follows:

1. The educational level of the women at the primary, secondary and higher levels has been increasing but their participation rate has not been rising correspondingly. In other words, the capability of women is increasing along with men reducing the gender gap in educational capabilities. However, this enhanced capability is not being utilised since there is still considerable disparity in income.

2. The second hypothesis to be tested is that female work participation rate has increased in informal sector with unstable wages but has shown a steady decline in more secured and stable employment.

3. The third hypothesis that is to be tested is that the women’s work participation rate is dependent upon the economic condition of the household as well as necessity of the household.
1.7 METHODOLOGY AND DATA SOURCE

Data for the purpose have been obtained both from secondary as well as primary sources. Information relating to women's participation rate in India and Assam has been obtained from the various Census Reports, International Labour Organisation Statistics / Central Statistical Organisation, NSS Reports, Statistical Abstract Handbook of Assam and Cachar, Statistical Profile of Barak Valley. From the secondary data we have obtained the percentage of women's participation rate and through tabular analysis, have examined the structure of women's labour force in low paid and high paid category of jobs. We have also made an attempt to relate the structural pattern with various socio-economic variables in order to assess the impact of such variables on the participation rate. The socio-economic variables selected for the purpose of our study have been Female Literacy, Sex Ratio, Freedom of Decision Making of Female, Attitude of Male towards female work, Necessity to work by female and Male Literacy. Apart from these variables, population growth and unemployment have also been theoretically discussed to understand the implication of these variables on the female work participation rate. One major part of the work has been the collection and treatment of the primary data, which have been obtained from the entire valley of South Assam comprising three districts of Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi. The districts have been divided into rural and urban areas. For the rural area, each of the districts has been
divided into their respective blocks. From each block, two villages have been selected on the basis of random sampling. From each of these villages, twenty households have been selected from the population on a purposive basis, giving due weightage to religion, language, caste, family size and their economic condition. For the urban area, each district headquarter has been taken into consideration. Additionally Panchgram being the only industrial town of the entire Barak Valley has also been included under urban area. Total sample size ultimately happens to be 645 with Cachar district contributing major share of 340 samples followed by Karimganj and Hailakandi with 175 samples and 130 samples respectively. Questionnaires have been sent to the respondents to obtain the required information necessary for our study. Questionnaires prepared for the purpose have been focused to seek information relating to their family size, education levels, work participation, individual and total family income, necessity of work, standard of living as reflected by the level of consumption of various items of necessity, comforts and luxury, attitude of the women herself towards work, promotion and her career, attitude of the male members of their family towards women's work. Information has also been obtained through the method of personal enquiry directly by the researcher. The information obtained has been classified, tabulated and analysed and fitted into models discussed below using multi staged stratified random sampling.
In order to test the hypothesis outlined above, we shall test the relationship between the participation rate of women and their determinants by the use of the following models.

Since the level and structure of employment is often affected by the degree of literacy we assume female participation rate to be an increasing function of the level of education. Therefore the first model that we specify is as follows:

\[ W_F = a + b_1 \text{Lit}_F \]

Where \( W_F \): Female Work Participation

\( \text{Lit}_F \): Female Literacy

Sex ratio or the number of female per thousand male is also important factor to determine the growth of female population over the years. Growth of female population contributes to the supply of female labour. Whether this change in the supply of female labour as a consequence of higher sex ratio results in the simultaneous participation of female workers needs to be assessed. We therefore specify the second model as follows:

\[ W_F = a + b_2 S_R \]

Where \( S_R \): Sex Ratio

Freedom to take decisions in family matters automatically entrusts some degree of authority to the person who is capable of taking a decision. The greater the autonomy in a women's ability to
take decision, the greater is her freedom to make a choice in her
decision to work. Consequently high decision-making ability may
reflect a high participation rate. The decision making ability of women
will be judged through primary data We therefore specify the next
model
\[ W_F = a + b_3 D_F \]

Where \( D_F \): Freedom of Decision Making of Female

Irrespective of the nature of society, male attitude towards
women work play a significant role in deciding women's entry or exit
form the labour market. In urban and in specially rural areas and also
in certain religious and social groups, this factor i.e. male attitude
towards women's work has a strong influence on the participation of
women in the labour market. We therefore formulate the next model
as follows:

\[ W_F = a + b_4 M_A \]

Where \( M_A \): Attitude of Male towards women's work

Necessity and economic compulsion force many women to work
in order to supplement the family income. In recent years, the concept
of economic emancipation, urbanization, education has acted as a
strong necessary incentive for women to work. Therefore it could be
argued that higher the necessity, higher would be the participation
rate. Consequently participation rate is assumed to be an increasing
function of the necessity to work. Therefore, the next model introduced is as follows:

$$W_F = a + b_5 \text{Nec}$$

where \( \text{Nec} \): Necessity to work

Along with female literacy, male literacy is also assumed to create a positive impact on the participation of women's worker. Higher male literacy is assumed to remove the cultural, religious and social taboos associated with women's work created by the patriarchal ideology. Therefore women's participation is positively related with male literacy. Accordingly the next model constructed is as follows:

$$W_F = a + b_6 \text{Lit}_M$$

where \( \text{Lit}_M \): Male Literacy

To determine the relative strength of all the independent variables for the purpose of ascertaining the structure of female participation, we have incorporated each of these variables using multiple regression analysis in the following models:

$$W_F = a + b_1 \text{Lit}_F + b_2 \text{S}_R$$
$$W_F = a + b_1 \text{Lit}_F + b_2 \text{S}_R + b_3 \text{D}_F$$
$$W_F = a + b_1 \text{Lit}_F + b_2 \text{S}_R + b_3 \text{D}_F + b_4 \text{M}_A$$
$$W_F = a + b_1 \text{Lit}_F + b_2 \text{S}_R + b_3 \text{D}_F + b_4 \text{M}_A + b_5 \text{Nec}$$
$$W_F = a + b_1 \text{Lit}_F + b_2 \text{S}_R + b_3 \text{D}_F + b_4 \text{M}_A + b_5 \text{Nec} + b_6 \text{Lit}_M$$
1.8 CONCLUSION

The extensive literature and growing awareness in women's studies have unleashed a new horizon of women's problems and perspectives, which though existed but perhaps had never been questioned. Therefore, the growth of women's studies has been not only a way of re-discovering the position of women but understanding an essential component of their growth. In spite of all such developments women's valuable contribution to the social and economic process of development are yet to be duly recognized and valued in monetary terms. In spite of women's growing levels of literacy, the pace of women's advance into men's jobs is slackening. In recent times women are gradually entering the so-called 'male domain' but modernization and globalization has brought advantage to different groups of men and women unequally. Mechanization in the developing world has often meant reducing the availability of jobs for women, rather than lightening their burden.

In Barak Valley of Assam, the situation is nowhere different. Women form a major component of the work force and are engaged in various form of agricultural work along with men but a major part of their activities remain unrecognized and unremunerated. Lack of modernization in the rural sector has penalized women as the number of women working in agriculture and related activities are quite high. The out-migration of youths and men has further aggravated the burden on the rural women. The declining role of crafts and cottage
industries in the face of competition from factory-produced commodities have also created a serious concern to the absorption of women into traditional industries. Though important changes have been taking place in the levels of literacy and more women are to be found in decision-making and managerial positions, from a macro perspective this description of women’s employment has not changed over time. The increased entry of women in the labour market and the changing economic role of women in the household have led to substantial impact on the work structure.

At a broader level of generalization, the development process has been adverse to women over the years. In India as well as in Barak Valley, with increased participation of women in the labour force, though the economic role of women has improved over the years, they are mainly concentrated heavily in agriculture, manual and casual work. The scenario of increasing labour market entry of women and a case study in relation to Barak Valley would help in understanding better the micro economic participation of women in various activities and their status thereof in relation to men.
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Chapter 1


Chapter 1

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