

## **Women Empowerment, A Myth or Reality? A Reflection on Gender Empowerment Measure, especially in Assam**

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### **Abstract:**

Today society demands to formulate inclusive growth for our socio-economic development. In order to achieve this target, there should be a rationalization of the trend of growth of human resource development indices. Human resource development indicates two things: human development and human resource development. Human Resource development is measured by Human Development Index. Human development means the development of life expectancy at birth, literacy and decent standard of living. Human resource development means enlargement of the people's choices, their skills, capacities, attitudes etc. (UNDP Report, 1996)

Besides these indicators of development as a whole, for measuring women empowerment there are separate indices for women itself. The Human Development Report in 1998 contains two gender aware measurements i.e. Gender-Related Development Index (GDI) and Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM). The GDI indicates three variables of Human Development Index for measuring women status regarding their life expectancy, educational attainment and their standard of living. The Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) looks at women representation in parliament, women's share of managerial and professional job and women's share of national income.

However, in the present society there is a demand to formulate human capital. It means that it is the quality of human beings which helps in the development of the country in accelerating the pace of development. For enhancing the pace of growth and development, there should be access to equal rights for everyone. But in reality we get a negative picture in the context of Gender Empowerment Measures. Whenever we talk about the status of women then it has been found that more than 90% women are engaged in unorganized sector, their works are not officially counted, they get lower wage than the men for the same work, they have comparatively poor health status, low educational status, and lower skill than the men. They are generalized as a group of vulnerable and marginalized section in all spheres viz. in educational field, in social situation, in economic activities and political field and so on.

**Key words:** Women, development and its reality.

### **1. Introduction**

Women constitute half of the total population of our country. Even a country like ours has the demand to formulate human capital as well as manpower in order to accelerate its growth and development. Improving women's productivity and quality of life implies a multidimensional contribution for the overall growth and development. Women's earning has a positive correlation with children's health, nutrition and education. It is rightly opined by J.N.Nehru that "you can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the status of its women". But women in our society are subjected to abuses economically, educationally, socially, politically, psychologically and so on. Large inequalities prevail in our society for the improvement of their capabilities in different spheres of life. Regarding the status of women as a whole, it has been found that women represent 50% of the total population; 30% are engaged in labour force and they perform more than 60% of all working hours, but they receive only 10% of the world's income and own even less than 1% of the world's property (ILO). The total literacy rate of India is 74.4 percent where the male percentage is 82.14 and female is 65.46, where the gap is 16.68 percent. (Census 2011). Besides,

even more than 90% women are engaged in unorganized sector (HDR, 1994), which is not officially counted.

Apart from the overall national picture, in Assam also if we focus our attention on the present scenario or status of women then the picture is also not at all rosy. Women have usually get lower wage than the men for the same work; they have comparatively poor health status, low educational status, and lower skill than the men. They are generalized as a group of vulnerable and marginalized section in all spheres viz. in educational field, in social situation, in economic activities and political field and so on. In fact, in a patriarchal society, women activities are considered as belonging to private domain whereas men's activities are considered as belonging to public domain

But the thing is that whenever we talk about the welfare of a nation then there is a demand to access the equal status for everyone or everybody has the right to enjoy the equal opportunity that is constitutionally has given to us. In this context the Nobel Laureates in Economics Amartya Sen has rightly opined that human poverty does not indicate people who are not able to access the basic amenities of life alone, rather it is the actual human poverty that are not able to access the basic human rights. Regarding the issue of women welfare as well as the national welfare as a whole, Amartya Sen said that Indian women don't think about equality.

Thus, empowering women is a need based demand of the present society that women are able to take decision inside and outside the home; they can enlarge their choices, they are able to access equal share for the same work as men has received, they are well acquainted with the need based skills, active participation in social as well as political activities etc for developing the positive social transformation of a nation.

## 2. Challenges before us:

Apart from these, we have also some challenges that must be addressed for our socio-economic development as a whole.

**First Challenge:** Even in a democratic country like ours society demands to formulate *inclusive growth* for our socio-economic development. Inclusive growth encompasses equality, equality of opportunity in accessing education, in access of health services, and protection in market and employment transitions<sup>1</sup>. Thus, the Government has the expectation or the target to ensure the idea of equality of opportunity in terms of access in economic field, in educational field, in social and cultural norms, in health sector and unbiased regulatory environment for business and individuals and so on.

**Second Challenge:** Besides achieving the target of inclusive growth in all sectors of socio-economic development of our country, there should also be concerted efforts to achieve the *challenges of the Millennium Development Goals by 2015*. Eight Millennium Development Goals<sup>2</sup> (MDGs) have been established in the Millennium Declaration at the General Assembly of the United Nations in the year 2000. These include promoting gender equality and empowerment of women and improving maternal health. Though only these two are explicitly gender specific, gender equality is at the core of achievement of MDGs – from improving health and fighting disease, to reducing poverty and mitigating hunger, to expanding education and lowering child mortality, to increasing access to safe water, and to ensuring environmental sustainability. In terms of gender inequality, it has been realized that gender inequality is a major obstacle to meeting the progress towards the MDGs. Therefore, there is a demand to eradicate the gender gap in terms of capacities, access to resources and opportunities, and vulnerability to violence and conflict. The Government has implemented various approaches and so many schemes for achieving the

<sup>1</sup> Growth Report: Strategies for Sustained Growth and Inclusive Development (Commission on Growth and Development, 2008)

<sup>2</sup> MDGs 2015, Report of 11<sup>th</sup> Five Years Plan

targets of MDGs

**Third Challenge:** In this present knowledge based society, there is an urgent need to *formulate human capital* or required manpower as per the society's need. Human capital realizes two things, i.e. the person and the person should be acquainted with the need-based skills. Actually, it indicates the utilization of the human resources and enhancing the capabilities of manpower for the development of the country. Human capital plays an important role in the development of a nation. It is the quality of human beings which helps in the development of the country in accelerating the pace of development. Developing countries need to control diseases and improve health and nutrition of this people. Good health makes people feel healthier and healthy people prove to be more productive workers. Investment in building the health care infrastructure and ensuring the availability of safe drinking water should be considered extremely useful for social capital. Thus, development of a state is an integral product of health, income and the level of education and their applications. Actually, the concept of human capital is linked with the growth and development of a nation, and therefore, the focus should be clearly traced out for capacity building among the people, particularly women in the states. Human capital is ensured through proper education only. Educated people are generally more productive workers because they can use the capital more effectively, adopt new technologies and learn from their mistakes.

Thus, each of them has the vision to require women's contribution towards the socio-economic progress by removing the gender gap as earliest. Therefore, it is a right time for us to rationalize each challenge about their actual progress, particularly in the context of women empowerment or their level of empowerment.

### **3. An Overview: Gender-Related Development Index (GDI) and Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM)**

While aiming these targets to fulfill, it is the right time to analyse the actual progress of women in terms of their human resource development. Human Resource development is measured by human development index. Human development means the development of life expectancy at birth, literacy and decent standard of living. Human resource development means enlargement of the people's choices, their skills, capacities, attitudes etc.<sup>3</sup>

Besides these indicators of development as a whole, for measuring women empowerment there are separate indices for women itself. The Human Development Report in 1998 contains two gender aware measurements i.e. Gender-Related Development Index (GDI) and Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM). The GDI indicates three variables of Human Development Index for measuring women status regarding their life expectancy, educational attainment and their standard of living. The Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM), looks at women representation in Parliament, women's share of managerial and professional job and women's share of national income.

In this paper, the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) has been used mostly as a tool for measuring the empowerment level of women particularly Assam.

**Objectives:** With keeping these challenges and taking the parameters or indicators of Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM), this paper has an attempt:

- To analyze the real achievement of women in terms of capacity building.
- To find out the responsible factors for lower rank of empowerment
- To measure the ways for accelerating capacity building among the women, particularly in Assam.

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<sup>3</sup> UNDP Report, 1996

**Methodology:** The method of the paper is purely descriptive and it is analytical in nature and data regarding women empowerment is extracted from secondary sources such as the report of Census 2001, Human Development Report of Assam 2003, UNDP Report, NFHS-I, II, and III, Growth Report: Strategies for Sustained Growth and Inclusive Development 2008, Report of 11<sup>th</sup> Five Years Plan etc.

#### **4. A Critical analysis: Present Status of Women in Assam**

The economy of Assam is mainly agro based. The population of the state is 26.66 million of which 12.85 million are female. As regards sex ratio, it is 932 females per 1000 males (Census of India 2001) and it is increased to 954 females per 1000 males in the census of 2011.

There is a value loaded concept that women in Assam are more liberal, they are free from the various social constraints, social evils like dowry, purdha system etc than the states like Bihar, Rajasthan or the Northern and Southern belt of India. The predominance of tribal economy or a long standing influence of tribal work pattern, where economy revolves on women labour, is the major factor for which the mobility of women in Assam and in the North East in general is considered far higher than it is in the other parts of the country. However, this does not mean that women in Assam are on an equal footing with men. Still in Assam, the capacity building among the women is a bigger challenge before us and also there is a rampant gender disparity in all human development sectors.

##### *4.1. Indicators of Women Empowerment Measure and its reality:*

Whenever we have rationalized the socio-economic status of women in terms of women development context, then we get a negative picture in terms of the progress towards achieving the challenges of inclusive growth, the MDGs and human capital growth. In Assam, there is a vast gender disparity in all the spheres of socio-economic growth and development.

*4.1.1 Education level of Women in Assam:* Out of the total literacy rate in Assam i.e. 64.3 percent, the male literacy percentage is 71.9 percent whereas the female literacy is 56 percent, with the gap of 15.9 percent (Census of India 2001) although during 1991-2001, annual average growth rate of female literacy (1.3 per cent) was more than that of male literacy rate (0.99 per cent). According to the Census of 2011, from the total literacy (73.18%) men literacy percentage is 78.81 whereas female occupies 67.27 percent with the gap of 11.54 percent. Again, the female enrolment is increasing in the primary and elementary level but still the enrolment rate of women in secondary and higher education segment is less than 33 per cent.

*4.1.2 Work Participation Rate:* In the rate of work force participation, there is also a significant gap, with the male occupying 49.87 percent and the female 20.71 percent, and the gap is 29.16 percent. The trend of female work participation rate is fluctuating in nature, the participation rate of female was 4.66 per cent in 1971 increased to 21.61 per cent in 1991 and again declined to 20.71 percent in 2001 (Assam Human Development Report, 2003 and Govt. of Assam).

##### *4.1.3 Women's access to credit system:*

If we take access to credit system into account as an indicator of economic empowerment of women, in Assam it is less than 12 percent. In economic activities, the percentage of the male worker is 70.26 percent whereas the female constitutes 29.74 percent only.

(Assam Human Development Report, 2003 and Govt. of Assam).

#### *4.1.4 Women in decision making process:*

Decision making is the ladder of women empowerment. It means women should have the capacity to control over the resources and they can enlarge their choices as per their required demands. But in reality, 26.9% of total women in Assam take decisions by themselves about the use of their own earnings as compared to almost 50% in case of India. However, awareness about micro credit programme is slightly higher in Assam (41.7%) than in India (38.6%). Yet, an insignificant percentage of women are able to pursue the loan from micro credit programme both in India (4%) and Assam (1.4%). Thus, it reveals how women are yet to come into forefront for ensuring the various entrepreneurial activities with the help of micro credit programmes.

#### *4.1.5 Women in professional and administrative sector:*

Even the total percentage of women employees in the public sector is 16.65 percent only in the year of 2007, whereas it was 14.98 percent in the year of 1994. Again in administrative sector, the total number of female I.A.S. and I.P.S. (as on 2000) is 10 and 2 only, whereas the male occupies 216 and 134. The lower employment rate of women in the public sector may be due to women discrimination, lack of skills or know how techniques or mostly their lower level of education.

#### *4.1.6 Women's involvement in political field:*

In a democratic country, capacity building of women also reflects how women are able to enjoy their rights in terms of political participation; it is because women's political participation is another input to their empowerment. Empowered women have political freedom which in turn translates into their decision making capacity both at the community and national level. Although the involvement of women in politics is growing but still the representative percentage to Legislative Assembly is less than 15 in the world as a whole, in India the figure is less than 10 and particularly in Assam the figure constitutes 0.8 percent in 1978 to 10.32 percent in the last assembly election i.e. the year of 2006. (Election Commission in India). Thus, through this picture it is cleared that in order to promote women involvement in decision making process, the political participation rate or awareness of women should be strengthen in Assam as well as in other parts of country.

### **5. Findings:**

Thus from the explanation on the basis abovementioned indicators regarding capacity building of women or their level of empowerment with keeping the demands of the present three challenges as urgent to fulfill, we have found that women in Assam are yet to go for achieving the progress towards women empowerment. The National Human Development Report 2001 places Assam at the 14th place in terms of the Human Development Index value, among the 15 States compared and at the 26th place among the 32 States compared in terms of the Human Development Index. In the 29th place among the 32 States compared in terms of Gender Disparity Index Rank which is below from the states like Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland. (Assam Human Development Report, 2003)

### **6. Factors; responsible for lower rank of women in terms of GEMs:**

Early marriage, lack of proper education, lower level of income, derecognition of work in monetary terms, lack of awareness, lack of transparency and visibility of the schemes which are particularly implemented for enhancing the capacity of women, lack of awareness into the pattern of equal pay for equal work, male-headed family, lack of willingness, confidence as well as predominance of superstition and traditional belief systems, women trafficking etc, are responsible for the present status of women in Assam.

### **7. Measures consider into account for capacity building of women:**

In the knowledge based society, capacity building among the women as human capital is a present based demand in order to achieve the targets of inclusive growth and or aiming the progress towards MDGs. In order to achieve these progress women should be skilled, they must be competent with their work, they must be aware about their status or position in the society, they should have the capacity to realize their basic human rights and also women should be capable for critical thinking to identify the oppressive forces in the society so that they can act for their own empowerment. Following are some measures that should be taken into account for capacity building of women.

- Role of Government should be directive as well as should have the practical vision or they must have the transparent political will towards the implementation of the schemes which are adopted as well as implemented for enhancing the capacity of people, particularly women in Assam. Now a days, due to transparent political will and its practical applications, Chhattisgarh can be considered as a model state in terms of successful implementation of public distribution system and the scheme of NREGS among the states in the country.
- It is fact that Assam or India as a whole is demographically very potential or vibrant, which is our national strength. It is because 51% of the Indian population is under the age of 25. Therefore in order to cater the needs of the people into the positive direction as well as making them as human capital, education should be need based as the present society demands. Education is the only way that makes human as skilled and competent in nature. But still in Assam or in India, the Gross Enrolment Ratio is 6.42 percent and 10 percent which is comparatively poor against the population. Therefore, apart from the conventional system of education, Open and Distance Learning (ODL) and Open and Distance E-Learning (ODEL) system should be welcome sincerely for beginning or starting a new frontier or vista in the education system. By launching various general, professional and vocational courses, Open and Distance learning gives the chance for those who are deprived to receive education due to their various constraints as well as it can also develop or mobilize the capacity of the people who wants to continue their education. Flexibility is the most important requirement of this system.
- Through Open and Distance Learning, various entrepreneurial courses or some need based training courses for the women of Self help Groups (SHGs) can be launched or designed through the help of Open universities and other ODL institutions. Before launching the courses, there is needed to go for survey, identify the needs of the women in a particular area, and then train them to utilize their local resources in productive ways and thus it may be not only helpful for women itself but the society as a whole.
- Finance is the most important source for the question of development. As a special category state Assam as well as the North East receives 90% grants and 10% loan centrally in terms of implementing development plans. Even these states are allowed to use 20% of central assistance for Non-plan expenditure and also 10% of the Budget(s) of the Central Ministries/Department will be earmarked for the development of the north-eastern state under the fund of non-lapsable pool, specifically for the development of infrastructure, economic and social situation. Besides, there is the provision of 'women component plan' where not less than 30% funds/ benefits are earmarked in all women related sector for ensuring women empowerment. We have also concerned into the effect of gender budget where the main aim is to analyze the budget expenditure from a gender perspective or it has the target to mainstream the gender perspectives into budget (i.e. the government expenditure and revenue should impact equally on men and women). In Assam, 12 departments cover gender budget in the year of 2008-09 which is a positive sign for us. But thing is that in Assam, there is a failure of the Government to utilize the fund properly, there is a leakage of fund (sensitive issue regarding fund leakages in N.C.Hill), lack of administrative training in budget analysis, lack of advocacy from opposition party of the Government as well as the role of civil society etc (such as universities, academicians, research institutions, intellectuals, group of

All Assam Student's Union, etc) which should be sincerely addressed for our state, regional and national development.

- Reservation policy regarding women reservation into the assembly and to the parliament should be practical in vision. There should have the scope in sharing the power, sharing the resources in order to strengthen the status of the group of marginalized (women, as a group of marginalized) in a periodic form. Such impetus (i.e. reservation) should be given till women are able to get a competitive rank against men or get equal level as men have in the political field. Involvement in politics mostly gives the chance to women for taking decision in policy formulation and practically, through this platform, they can raise their voice for the equal rights and opportunities.

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