

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: A STUDY ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE RURAL AREAS OF ASSAM

DR. BAISHALEE RAJKHOWA, ARUNA DEB ROY

Abstract: Empowerment is basically recognition of women's individuality. In a male dominated society, a woman is generally denied equality of status and opportunities. In the developing process of any woman there ought to be an integration of economic, academic, legal, political and cultural aspects. The greatest challenge today is to empower woman which constitutes half of the population of the country. As the saying goes, "The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world", a woman is not only responsible for welfare of the people in the family but also of the society in which she lives. Though illiteracy is considered as the main hurdle for the progress of a woman, according to the National Family Health Survey Report of 2005-06, there is a relation between illiteracy and violence against married woman. The status of woman is well reflected through its literacy rate. The scenario in Assam in the post-independence era was not an appreciable one but gradually the trend has changed. Although this shift has changed the face of the society yet a lot is yet to be done. Undoubtedly the role of government is noteworthy and it is still taking baby steps for uplifting the face of women literacy in the state. Women across the globe have been fighting for equal rights and status for several years and the constitution of India has also provided Article 15 to recognize equal status of woman as a basic right. Thus, this study is an attempt to throw light on how higher education can contribute towards the empowerment of women in the rural areas of Assam.

Keywords: Empowerment, Higher education, Illiteracy, Rural woman

Introduction: Empowerment is basically the recognition of women's individuality. In a male dominated society, a woman is generally denied equality of status and opportunity. In the developing process of any woman there ought to be an integration of economic, academic, legal, political and cultural aspects. The greatest challenge today is to empower woman which constitutes half of the population of the country. As the saying goes, "The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world", a woman is not only responsible for welfare of the people in the family but also of the society in which she lives. Though illiteracy is considered as the main hurdle for the progress of a woman, according to the National Family Health Survey Report of 2005-06, there is a relation between illiteracy and violence against married woman. The status of woman is well reflected through its literacy rate as education of women is a vital weapon in achieving desirable changes in society. Thus, education can be regarded as the stepping stone for empowering women.

According to the Oxford dictionary, "empowerment" means, 'to give power', 'make able', 'to give authority' and so on. In simple terms, women empowerment means giving full power and authority to act for their own development and making them equal partners with men in the society. An empowered woman should have the following capacities:

- The power to solve problems themselves.
- Conscious of their rights and duties.
- Ability to identify their own problems.
- Capacity building power.
- A positive self-image.

- Power to take decision.
- Communication skill.
- Self-reliance and self-respect
- Capacity for group development and group cohesion.

The scenario in Assam in the post-independence era was not an appreciable one but gradually the trend has changed. Although this shift has changed the face of the society but a lot is yet to be done. Undoubtedly the role of government is noteworthy and it is still taking baby steps for uplifting the face of women literacy in the state. Women across the globe have been fighting for equal rights and status for several years and the Constitution of India has also provided Article 15 to recognize equal status of woman as a basic right. Since education is closely connected with change in attitude towards social issues, so absence of it might act as a major constraint towards the new avenues of life. Thus, this study is an attempt to throw light on how higher education can contribute to the empowerment of women in the rural areas in Assam.

The contemporary Indian society is undergoing a tremendous change in all the spheres of life as it is crawling from a traditional society to a modern one. With rapid urbanisation and advancement in science and technology, our lives are becoming more critical and complicated. There has been a growing concern among the policy makers and planners that development should be accompanied by corresponding changes in attitudes, knowledge, skills and values in order to become self-sustainable.

Objectives of the study:

1. To explore the level of literacy of rural women in Pamohi and Ahomgaon areas of greater Guwahati in Assam.
2. To investigate the sources of income of rural women in those areas.
3. To evaluate the perception of rural women towards higher education and its role in their socio-economic growth.

Methodology: The present study is confined to Pamohi and AhomGaon areas located at the outskirts of Guwahati city in the west of Kamrup district in Assam. Evaluative survey method has been used. As the areas are dominated by plains tribe communities like Boro and Karbi tribes, only 50 plain tribe women were selected in a random manner. The data was collected with the help of an interview schedule. The schedule contained both general information of the respondents as well as information regarding income generating activities. Data obtained through the use of an interview schedule was compiled, tabulated and analysed by using simple statistical tools, keeping in view the objectives of the study.

Findings and discussion:

1. From the data collected, it is found that the highest number of women, i.e. 50%, is of the age group of 41-50, followed by 24% in the age group of 31-40.
2. It is pertinent that the level of education is very low as most of the residents i.e., 96% of the women had not completed their 10th standard. Only 2% of the women had completed their 12th standard.
3. The trend and benefit of vocational training was nil in the area which was under study as the women interviewed have never received or got an access to any kind of vocational training in their entire life.
4. Most of the residents i.e., 52% were working as daily wage labourers, 20% of the women interviewed were house wives, 20% did farming and only 8% helped their husbands in their business which revealed that most of the interviewees depended on the paltry sum of money which they earned daily. The day they could not go out of their homes, they had no income.
5. The study revealed that 64% of the women were married, followed by 12% unmarried people and 4% women interviewed were widowed. The data showed that once married they had borne children at a very young age and also had to earn a living or lend a helping hand to their husband.
6. The total members in the family were 56% in the group of 9-12 years, followed by 32% in 5-8 years group and again 12% in 0-4 year's group which reveal that there are more dependent members in

the family than earning members and hence the living standard of the people was low.

7. The main source of income for the family was through daily wage system i.e., 56% were daily wage labourers, followed by farming which is 26% while 18% women were involved in their husband's business. As most of the women had to earn their living by working as daily wage labourers this revealed that they did not have any access to higher education or vocational training or else they could have earned their living in a better manner than working as labourers.

TABLE:1

Source of income of the family	In nos.	In %
Business	09	18
Farming	13	26
Daily wage labour	28	56
Total	50	100

8. All the women stayed in their own house which was the only respite for them.
9. The percentage of earners were less i.e., 36% in comparison to non- earners which is 64% which revealed that the women had to depend solely on the money earned through the various sources by their husbands. They did not have any other source of earning money.
10. The monthly income of majority of the households i.e. 58%, ranged from Rs. 5000-10000 category followed by 34% of Rs. 0-5000 category. Only 8% revealed that their monthly income was more than Rs.10000. This finding revealed that the monthly income of most of the people was very less and thus the living standard was also very low. Some of the children could not continue with their studies because of financial constraints and hence dropped out from school.

TABLE:2

Monthly income (in Rs.)	In nos.	In %
0-5000	17	34
5000-10000	29	58
10000 & above	04	8
Total	50	100

11. The main reason of school dropouts was early marriage which was 44%. 36% said that it was a financial problem while 20% revealed that they were not interested in studies. This data also showed that education has not been considered as an important parameter for women empowerment.

TABLE:3

Reasons of dropping out from school	In nos.	n %
Early marriage	22	44
Financial problems	18	36
Not interested in studies	10	20
Total	50	100

12. Each household had children and maximum number i.e., 34% had children in the age group of 0-2 years category, followed by 44% in the category of age group of 3-5 years old, and 22% of 5-10 years category. Most the children were infants and their mothers had to look after them.
13. Maximum number of children was enrolled in schools i.e., 76% and only 12% were infants and so they have not yet been enrolled in schools.
14. Majority of the women, 24%, responded that education was important to generate income. 22% revealed that education was imperative to raise their standard of living while 22% said that education was essential to increase their family income. 16% were also of the view that education would also increase their status in society and improve their economic standard of living. While the remaining added that it is beneficial to guide their children in studies, get a better job and also go for a better business venture. In fact, all the women interviewed had the same view that higher education was imperative for raising their standard and also for generating income.

TABLE:4

Benefit of education	In nos.	In %
Improved standard of living	11	22
Increased Personal income	12	24
Increased Family income	11	22
Better medical awareness	4	8
Increased status in society	08	16
Guiding children	2	4
Better job	1	2
Better business	1	2
Total	50	100

15. Majority of the households, 48%, possessed domestic animals like pig, hen, cow, etc. 21% of the households owned handlooms, 19% kitchen garden and 12% farmlands. The animals

domesticated were to fulfill their own needs every day. Though the households possessed handlooms they were not aware that they could sell their handicrafts and thus earn some money. The vegetables grown in their kitchen garden were for their own consumption. Farm lands possessed by them could not yield a rich harvest that could run for the whole year. So, ultimately they had to buy their ration from shops.

16. 94% of the people stated that they were not satisfied with their standard of living. Only 6% said that they were satisfied which points to the fact that the women have taken their present state as their destiny. They do not have the courage or the strength to change their lives.
17. The major hurdle faced by the people was financial crunch which was 62%. 26% showed lack of awareness while only 12% revealed that they did not have the knowledge regarding sources for generating income.
18. Majority of the women i.e., 44%, said that taking up training in vocational education is a must, followed by higher education i.e., 32%. 18% confirmed that education would help them to lead a healthy life, and only 6% are of the view that education would give them a new exposure to alternative source of income. The data also revealed that most of the women strongly felt that higher education is imperative for leading a good life. The fact was that they did not have an access to it as they were not aware or did not have the requisite exposure.

Suggestions and Conclusion: One of the essential tools for capacity building of rural women is education- the access to which many women are denied off. It is a known fact that empowerment of women is not possible without literacy as it is the first building block of development upon which social care, health issues, employment as well as empowerment rests. It is the corner stone of women's empowerment because it enables them to respond to opportunities, to shed their traditional roles and thereby change their milieu. Today, society has undergone a rapid transition from the pastoral to the contemporary information and global society but the status of women still needs an overhaul. The plain tribal women in the area under investigation were eager, interested and capable of adopting some income generating activities and also undergo some sort of vocational training to make their existence worthwhile. Since the women come from lower income group families, they could not begin a business on their own. Most of the families earned their living as daily wage labourers. Also these women never got a chance for vocational training as they were not aware that such kind of trainings are organised by NGOs and government institutions free

of cost for generating income for their families. It can be also observed that since the women did not have an access to higher education, they also could not generate income other than been working as labourers. But the question arises as to whether women actually wish to get empowered or not. Unless and until women do not change their mindset, their attitude towards higher education will remain

unchanged. So, Government, both Central and State, NGOs and Voluntary organisations should try their best to make these women self- dependent and empowered by organizing vocational training programmes so that they could be catalysts to change. As Birgham Young has rightly quoted, "You educate a man; you educate a man. You educate a woman; you educate a generation."

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Dr. Baishalee Rajkhowa/Assistant Professor/
Royal Group of Institutions/Assam/ India/baishaleeraj@gmail.com
Ms. Aruna Deb Roy/Assistant Professor/Royal Group of Institutions/
Assam/ India/ arunadebroy87@gmail.com