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Higher Education and Women Empowerment in the Context of Assam
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Abstract

Women are the indispensable part of a society. Education has been recognized as an essential agent of social change and development in any society. Hence, to think of harmonious development without educating women is impossibility. Moreover it can be rightly said that to educate a woman is to educate the whole family. There is a Chinese saying, "If you wish to plan for a year, plant wheat, if you wish to plant for 10 years, grow trees, if you wish to plan for 100 years educate your women". This indicates the importance of women education. But in India higher education is still at its initial stage as far as women are concerned and it would be too early to predict that higher education releases the road to empowerment of women. Many a times, we have witnessed women having a healthy educational background and a wealthy economic status in society subjected to gender-based violence- physical or mental. The Government in India has introduced multiple policies and schemes to accommodate women in its much hyped inclusive development. The newest amongst it is Beti Bachao Beti Parhao. It is aimed at spreading awareness amongst the people in India towards protecting the daughters from social evils and to empower them through education. However, the research studies indicate relative performance of Assam in women's educational attainment. So, through this studies attempt has been made to understand about the higher education and women empowerment in the context of Assam.

Key Words: Higher Education, Women Empowerment, Stereotypes, Double Burden, Assam.

Introduction: Higher Education in India is still at its initial stage as far as women are concerned and it would be too early to predict that higher education releases the road to empowerment of women. Many a times, we have witnessed women having a healthy educational background and a wealthy economic status in society subjected to gender-based violence- physical or mental. What has challenged their intellectual capabilities? While the liberal feminists have emphasized on the importance of education for women, it would be wrong to overlook the concern of the radical feminists who have tried to blame patriarchy as the root cause of women oppression.

Women are the indispensable part of a society. Education has been recognized as an essential agent of social change and development in any society. Hence, to think of harmonious development without educating women is impossibility. Moreover it can be rightly said that to educate a woman is to educate the whole family. As we know that the development of future generation mainly depends upon the education of women section. So, the education of women is realized to be the most essential part for the development of the society. It helps every woman to educate their children in a proper way and also helps them to be good manager of the family as well as the active member of the society. The children learn their manners and behavior at home and mostly mothers

are responsible for cultivating good behavior in their children .Every educated woman can run her house well and make it a paradise on earth .Every educated woman can think well about her future and her aim in life and then choose the appropriate subject which will be useful to her throughout the life. In a democratic system the position of women is equal with that of men. However, our cultural conditioning is the main source of atrocities against women. Culturally, a woman in India is supposed to remain confined at home for internal domestic routine work and men on the other hand are the bread earner. However, due to the spread of education a lot of changes could be observed. There is a Chinese saying, “If you wish to plan for a year, plant wheat, if you wish to plant for 10 years, grow trees, if you wish to plan for 100 years educate your women*. This indicates the importance of women education. Napoleon said that, “Give me an educated mother, I shall promise you the birth of a civilized nation. By educating the women we can educate the whole nation, because a country can never rise without the contribution of 50% of its population.” Swami Vivekananda once said that, “It is impossible to think about the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is impossible for a bird to fly on only one wing.” The fortune of a nation depends upon the educational system of that nation. So it can be said that without the empowerment of women we cannot think about the overall development of a country.

Women and Education in India:

Statistics of women all around the world declare two deplorable facts:

- Of the world’s one billion illiterate, two thirds are women.
- The value of women’s unpaid housework and community work is estimated at 35 percent of GDP worldwide.

These facts vividly portray that a good number of women around the world are subjected to intellectual, economic and social discrimination no matter how loud the drums of women empowerment are beaten up by the ruling governments across the world. Policies have always been introduced and enacted towards women empowerment, but cases of violence against women- both in public and private spaces reveal new dimensions of women oppression.

If we go a little back in history, we see that women education in India has its roots in British Regime. In 1854, the East India Company acknowledged women’s education and employment. Initially this education was limited only to primary school level education and the well-to-do families could afford it.

During this period, we also read Indian social reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar talking vigorously of women upliftment by removing evil practices like sati, child marriage and polygamy. They also worked towards giving rights to Muslim women and the widows as well. It was Jyotiba Phule who was the pioneer in establishing a girls’ school in 1863.

After Independence of the country in 1947, we witness that equal constitutional rights were guaranteed to the Indian women along with the men. Women started playing an important role in the social movements of 1970s and 80s. However this period did not record any significant data on the literacy of women and their empowerment. The 1990s brought in the dawn of globalization in India and since then, women became a separate category of analysis.

India’s higher education system is the third largest in the world, next to United States of America and China. In India, University Grants Commission (UGC) serves as a vital link between the Union and State Governments and the institutions of higher learning. However education in general and higher education in particular, is yet to engulf within it the women group. Studies confirm that

female literacy has a significant influence in improving social and economic status of women. But the female literacy rate is woefully lower than that of male. According to 2011 Census, the literacy rate of men is 78.81% and that of women is 67.27%.

The Government in India has introduced multiple policies and schemes to accommodate women in its much hyped *inclusive development*. The newest amongst it is *Beti Bachao Beti Parhao*. It is aimed at spreading awareness amongst the people in India towards protecting the daughters from social evils and to empower them through education.

However, the research studies indicate relative performance of Assam in women's educational attainment. It is mainly due to high drop-out rate among girls. Further enrolment in higher education is relatively low in Assam. But among the various North Indian states, the incidence of domestic violence is the least in Assam. This observation makes clear that position of women in Assam can be considered to be a mixed bag. In Assam though the increasing rate in female literacy is satisfactory, still it is not equal position with the male counterparts.

Table.1: Literacy Rate in Assam 1951-2011

Year	Person	Male	Female
1951	18.53	28.01	7.58
1961	32.95	44.28	18.62
1971	33.94	43.72	22.76
1981	-	-	-
1991	52.89	61.87	43.03
2001	63.25	71.28	54.61
2011	73.18	78.81	67.27

Source: Provisional population. Census of India, 2011

Though this picture vividly show that the literacy rate of women in Assam is not equal with men but it is seen that women are now pursuing higher education and holding prestigious posts in government offices and private organizations. During the last two decades, there has been a significant rise in the involvement in the field of education. For instance, recently in the UPSC result of 2015 we have seen that the top position is occupied by women. And in case of Assam also we have seen some women are able to occupy rank in UPSC. So, this result will obviously create a positive impact among the new generation.

Stereotypes Attached to Indian Society:

There have been a number of factors serving as impediments to the intellectual and economic empowerment of women. Two of the most important are briefly explained below:

- **Traditional values and customs:** In India, cultural ethos and norms play an important role in socialization of men and women. While men occupy the public spaces, women are confined to the private domain. However, this private domain is also guided by the patriarchs of the family. Men are the bread earners for women never got a chance to do so. Indian women have always been considered to be an epitome of sacrifice. They are considered to be great care-takers of the elderly and the children. They are supposed to keep up the religious beliefs and protect the generation from any identity crisis. As such in most societies, their ability to reason has never been considered as an area of analysis or experimentation.

- **Double burden:** With globalization making the world a smaller and a connected one to live in, gender relations have come to occupy a vital position in contemporary debates and discussions. Emergence of areas like *Women Studies* and *Gender Studies* have brought in new concepts and challenges linked to gender. Now women education might not be an area of study but unpaid labor is a serious area of analysis to the feminists. Sharing of responsibilities between the spouses is being emphasized to protect women from double burden.

Apart from that there are some other factors retarding the progress of women's education are:

- General indifference to education of girls.
- Social resistance arising out of fear and misconceptions that might alienate girls from traditions and social values and lead to maladjustment, conflicts and non-conformism.
- Early marriage and social inhibitions against girls pursuing education after marriage.
- Prevalence of child labour among girls belonging to weaker sections and the hard domestic chores which some of the unmarried girls-even in the middle-class families are required to perform.
- The prevailing notion that the sole occupation of women is to bear children, looks after her husband and children, and thus be restricted to domestic work

Thus there are some other problems which need to be solved prior to talking of higher education leading towards empowerment of women because this higher education doesn't accommodate all sections of women and it would be a mistake to consider women to be a homogeneous category.

Working Women in Assam and Role Conflicts: While instances of dowry deaths and honor killings are least, it doesn't necessarily indicate zero violence against women. Assamese society is a liberal one but not matriarchal. Patriarchy is standing strong in the path of women empowerment. But the positive scenario is women are increasingly ascertaining their identities in the job market. From medicine to technical field, academics to law, management to hospitality, literature to performing arts, women in Assam have excelled in all fields.

However, the liberal Assamese society which has given equal rights to women is also adhered to strong cultural stereotypes so far as the private sphere is concerned. The socialization of children in Assam is no different from the rest of the country. Gendered roles are prevalent in this part of the country as well. As such it has its impact felt on the public spaces in terms of women employability.

Here in Assam, as mentioned earlier, number of school girl drop-outs is more than the number of girls completing education up to the age of fourteen, leave alone the number of highly educated women.

Hence, given a chance and some time, it won't be difficult to figure out the actual number of highly educated working women in Assam in various fields and the role conflicts associated with their daily schedule.

In current times, most of the families in Assam have both the spouses working. What is interesting here is to know that family tensions and commitments have compelled a large number of women to give up their high potential and salaried jobs. And even if they continue work, progress and growth are less owing to time management. May be that's why a new group of women entrepreneurs are finding way to climb up the success ladder giving up strict job timings.

Suggestion towards Breaking the Stereotypes Attached to Indian Society: After conducting this study it can be said that for the empowerment, women themselves should be very conscious about their rights and liberties. To keep equal footing with men in this dynamic world, they must challenge and change the ideologies, patriarchal attitudes and stereotypical view of family which have marginalized them for so long. Patriarchal domination, subjugation has been continuing over centuries. So it cannot be overcome in few decades. Thus, the women class must realize their subordinate position and should take some efforts for emancipation. For that, the change of mindset of both male and female is necessary. The children should be socialized properly without gender bias. Awareness amongst the illiterate women should be developed by organizing some awareness programs in rural areas

Conclusion: So, from the above discussion, we can well connect with our introductory statement that it would be too early to consider higher education releasing the path to women empowerment. The Radical feminists believe that the utmost important task to be done to protect women from oppression is to dilute the patriarchal norms prevailing in the private sphere. Without equality in private sphere, women cannot expect to be equal in public spaces. Hence, this statement of the Radical feminists blend well with our pilot study where most of the women Professors, some of them even having a Doctoral Degree, admitted that at times they face difficulty in balancing between their home and workplace. And one of the common reasons has been double burden!

In this area there has been a great deal to work on. But the initial objective has been to shed some light on the fact that even though women have higher educational qualifications, yet they face a lot of obstacles in climbing the success ladder. Their jobs have given them economic security, but are all women have independent decision-making powers? Isn't women empowerment too heavy a statement to be declared so soon?

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