
Women at the 21st Century: A reflection on the status and security of women in Assam

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Abstract: *The greatest challenge today is to improve the status of women who constitute half the population of the country. The Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles given in the Constitution of India bear faithful application of the principle of nondiscrimination so that women are entitled to the same rights as men as citizens of India. Yet women are not treated as equal as men. Under the 'Trickle down theory' in the planning process it was expected that women will equally benefit along with men. The Indian plan document recognizes that inspite of development measures and constitutional legal guarantees; women have lagged behind in almost all sectors. It is often seen that despite tremendous contribution of women to all sectors, their work is considered just an extension of the household domain and remains non-monetized. This study attempts to explore on the much debated question on the status of women, how far they are secured in society and how far they are empowered. This study highlights the status of women in respect of employment, education, demographic, and health scenario. Moreover, women's attitude, political participation of women and women's access to monetary resources and credit are also incorporated in this paper. The study is being enriched by supplying numerical facts on different parameters and efforts are also given to make a comparative analysis with the all India level. Further, an effort is also made to suggest the ways to improvise their existing status. It is observed from the study that the status of women of Assam is high in comparison to the women of some other States of India in some respects but they are not fully secured. But various cases of crimes against women in the State are increasing alarmingly. Hence, some strategic approaches for improving women's status in Assam are quite necessary.*

Keywords: Status of Women, Female workforce Participation, Women Violence, North Eastern Region, Women Access to credit.

1. Introduction

A nation is marked as progressive and successful if it is able to provide equal status to all of its citizens regardless of

their caste, class, sex etc. Indian social thinkers like Pandit Jawaharlal Neheru, Mahatma Gandhi and many more also felt the necessary improvement of the status of women for progressive and successful nation building. In the words of Pandit Neheru, “You can tell me the condition of a nation by looking at the status of its women.” Accordingly, the Constitution of India provides equality to women and also empowers the state to adopt measures in favour of women to upgrade them from their disadvantageous status in terms of socio-economic, education and political scenario. Despite all efforts, how far the Indian women are empowered, how far they are socially, economically and politically at par with the male counterparts, and how far their attachment with the household decision making etc are still a matter of debatable questions.

2. Objectives

The main objective of this paper is to access the status of women in the context of liberalize and globalize economic environment. The specific objectives are –

- To access the status of women in the country in general and Assam in particular.
- To make a comparative analysis on the status of women in the state with the country as a whole in the context of workforce participation, level of education, health, political participation etc.
- To access the security and safety of women in the state and the government intervention to improve the status of women in all respects.
- To access the incidence of crime against women in the state of Assam.
- Finally, to formulate some key strategies and to forward some specific suggestions based on the findings of the study.

3. Methodology

The study, in fact, is a descriptive in nature. The study is based on secondary data which are collected from books, journals, periodicals and internet resources. Only 'Average' and 'Percentage' are used as statistical measure for analyzing the different relevant information. The major limitation of the study is that the information of the study collected from secondary sources. Therefore, the study suffers from all the limitations of secondary data.

4. Status of Women in Assam

The concept of status is one of the key factors in any reading of social behaviour and in the workings of a society. It is regarded as a multidimensional concept consisting of societal, legal and attitudinal attributes. The concept of status is used to indicate the ordering of individuals in society and the various bases on which the concept is formulated. Generally speaking, the status of women means the hierarchical position of the women achieved through the enactment of the roles allotted to them by the society in which they live. Women's status depends mainly upon her rights and privileges and the role assigned to her, most often on the basis of gender. The rise of strong women's movement across the world, particularly during the last century, has led to the recognition of women's rights as human rights. This in turn, has led to the formulation of several international conventions and national laws that provide for equality between men and women. However until the root causes of suppression of women are addressed, legal rights will continue to be superficial.

The status of women in the North East is comparatively better than women in the rest of India. They have greater levels of mobility, economic autonomy and control over their labour than many women in other parts of India. The development and corresponding women's status in Assam is directly linked with the social, religious and cultural traditions, stages of economic development, level of education and political participation among other factors. It is contrary to the general perception that women of Assam are as disadvantageous as the women in rest of the country,

but in certain respects the position of women in Assam is weaker than that in other states of the country.

It is well documented that Assam is a place where chronic poverty and deprivation are clearly seen almost in every geographical confines. It is observed from the data documented by NEDFI that 36.09% of the total population of Assam continues to live below the poverty line, which is much higher than the national average of 26.1%. Importantly, the percentage of people living below the poverty line in Assam is highest among the other seven states of the NER. Arguably, poverty has a women's face out of every ten poorest persons of the world, six are women. It may be said that women of Assam also bears this burnt of poverty. At the same time, there remains a consensus that women of Assam have generally enjoyed greater freedom in their daily lives compared with Indian women as a whole. However, Assam government has launched several schemes for empowerment of women, including unmarried, unemployed single women and widows. Under the schemes of Empowerment of Unmarried and Unemployed Single Women and Widows (*Baidou and Nabou*), Financial Incentive to Girls belonging to BPL families (*Na-Bowari*) who marry after attaining the age of twenty years and *Mukhya Mantrir Jiban Jyoti Achoni* are important.

The following section examines the status of women in Assam, by carrying out an analysis by taking into account the above indicators.

A) Employment Status

The status of women in Assam can be analyzed on the basis of their employment status, the percentage distribution of workers (main, marginal and non workers), and workforce participation rate in the state. Below Table-1 shows the percentage of main, marginal and non workers belonging to both the sex in respect of Assam in 2001 on the basis of geographical location, Level of Literacy and Per Capita DDP. These data throws some light on the gender structure of workforce in the economy. It is observed from the data that

in all categories of districts of Assam wherein women are engaged mainly as marginal workers. The percentage of women as main workers is very low in the districts of lower Assam, while the percentage of women as marginal workers is the highest in the districts of upper Assam since majority of them are engaged in the Tea Industry either employed as casually or permanently.

Table 1
Area, Literacy and Per Capita DDP wise workers in Assam, 2001
(Figures in percent)

Category		Main Workers		Marginal Workers		Non Worker	
		Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Geographical Area	Lower Assam	43.23	7.31	5.59	7.85	51.34	84.84
	Central Assam	42.38	8.33	6.96	9.50	50.65	82.15
	Upper Assam	41.68	15.62	11.47	39.55	47.63	66.90
All Assam		42.45	9.82	7.41	10.89	50.13	79.28

Source: Census of India, 2001; Nayak, Purusottam and Mahanta, Bidisha, Jan.2009

It is observed from Table-2 that in case of main workers, percentage of females is much lower than that of males irrespective of districts whereas more females are engaged as marginal and non workers as compared to male counterparts. This reflects the relative disadvantaged position of women in the state in respect of employment. If it is analyzed on the basis of geographical location, it is observed that most of the Upper Assam districts show high proportion of total workforce participation as well as high female workforce participation implying that the area to be a relatively developed one.

Table 2
Area wise Workforce Participation Rate in Assam, 2001
(Figures in percent)

Category		Persons	Male	Female
Geographical Area	Lower Assam	32.49	48.66	15.16
	Central Assam	32.23	49.05	14.42
	Upper Assam	42.98	52.36	32.90
All Assam		35.78	49.87	20.71

Source: Census of India, 2001; Nayak, P. and Mahanta, B.2009

It is further observed that the districts in Lower Assam and Central Assam shows almost same pattern of low workforce participation rate as compared to Upper Assam. Male workforce participation rate does not vary much with the literacy rate. However, percentage of female workforce participation significantly varies and it is positively related with the literacy rate. Assam is not the worst among major states of the Indian Union in terms of human development and gender equality but it ranks quite low. Assam has a largely rural agrarian economy, which is characterized by high rate of work participation of women. Though Female Work Participation Rates (FWPR) is high (Sahidullah, 2009), as it is subsistence farming, women do not benefit economically, though they share a disproportionate share of the work burden. The work participation rate of the women in Assam is considerably lower than that of men in general except in the primary sector where the rates are in favor of women. The participation of women in the secondary and tertiary sectors is lower in Assam. The gender gap in the work participation rate is obviously in favor of women in the primary sector and in favor of men in the other two sectors.

Table 3 shows the class wise distribution of female workers in Govt sector of the state to examine the nature and status of women employment in the state. Data reveal that in 1994 only 14.98% of total government employees were women and they were mostly employed in class III category of government services. This shows a very

disappointing picture about status of women employment in Assam. As per the statistics of Govt. of Assam (2006), there were only 16.65% of women employees in the govt. jobs. There has not been any significant increase in the percent of women govt. employees in the period of 12 years from 1994 to 2006. The Govt. of Assam recently announced a policy of reservation of 30% for women in employment as a strategy for women empowerment.

Table 3
Distribution of Government Women Employees in Assam

Categories of Employees	No. of Employees		Percentage of Women Employee in	
	Total	Women	1994	2006
Class I	8145	713	8.75	NA
Class II	6242	374	5.99	NA
Class III	236916	41025	17.31	NA
Class IV	53532	3582	6.69	NA
Total	304835	45694	14.98	16.65*

Source: Assam Human Development Report, 2003;

* Statistical Hand Book of Assam, 2007

Further, workforce participation rate (2001) reveals that it is lower for Assam as compared to India as a whole (Table 4). The rate is much lower in rural Assam (36.4%) as compared to rural India (42%). However, the gap is narrower in case of urban areas, be it in India as a whole or in Assam. About half of the male population is engaged in work in Assam but in case of women, the rate is much lower, about a fifth are engaged in work. In rural areas, the rate is higher for women than that in urban Assam. Again, in the rural areas of Assam, the women workforce participation is much lower than All India.

Table 4
Workforce Participation Rate in Assam
(Per 1000 persons)

State/ Country	Total			Rural			Urban		
	Person	Male	Female	Person	Male	Female	Person	Male	Female
Assam	359	499	205	364	498	223	320	510	103
India	393	519	257	420	524	310	322	508	115

Source: Assam Human Development Report, 2003

Unemployment and poverty is the most striking feature of the economy of Assam. According to the latest figure, the registered unemployed stimulate poverty. Importantly, educated unemployment is increasing alarmingly in Assam. Graduates account for 20% and school leaver account for 57% of the registered unemployed persons in Assam. Nevertheless, according to Economic Survey, Assam 2009-10, women constitute 32.5% of all organized sector workers, as opposed to only 19% for all India in the same sector.

Table 5 highlights the trend of women's employment (in p/c) in the organized sector. Interestingly, the level of such employment percentage is approximately 30% in average during the period (1990-2008). In fact, this rate of women employment (in p/c) is only a 'feel good factor', keeping the promise of 30% job reservation for the women of Assam, but the reality speaks a different language. Most of the women worker's in Assam are engaged in Tea industry either as permanent or temporary/ casual workers and are a marginalized section of the people of Assam.

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Table -5
Employment of Women in Organized Sector, Assam, 1990-2008

Year	Rate of Employment of women in p/c	Year	Rate of employment of women in p/c
1990	30	2003	30
1998	31	2004	30.5
1999	33	2005	34.5
2000	32	2006	34
2001	33	2007	34
2002	29.5	2008	32.5

Source: Statistical Hand Book, Assam 2008, Economic Survey, Assam 2009-10

B) Educational Status

The educational attainment status of women of Assam at district level can be analyzed through female literacy rate and female enrolment rate at different stages of education. As per Census, 2011, all the Upper Assam districts have high female literacy rate and it is above state average. Female literacy rate is highest in Upper Assam (62.35%) which is quite higher than state average (67.27%). Central Assam and Lower Assam show almost same performance in the field of female literacy rate which is far below Upper Assam. Similar pattern is also observed in case of total literacy i.e.73.18% which is higher than the state average. (Table 6)

In the field of education, women in Assam are in a better position than the all-India average. As per 2011 census the literacy rate for Assam is 73.18 per cent as against 74.04 per

cent for India. Female literacy stands at 67.27 per cent (India-65.46 per cent). The male female gap in the literacy rate is still perceptible although it is declining over time and is much below the all-India average. Attainment of a higher literacy rate alone does not make a community educationally advanced. Completion of primary stage of education and continuation of school upto 15 years of age, etc. are taken as indicators of educational attainment. The phenomenon of school drop-out is a negative indicator of educational attainment. The drop out rates of both boys and girls in Assam remained higher than all-India average from 1981 to 2011. The drop-out rate of girls was higher in most of the years (Nayak and Mahanta, 2009).

Table 6
Area, Literacy and Per Capita DDP wise Female Literacy in Assam
(Figure in per cent)

Category		Female Literacy Rate 2001	Female Literacy Rate 2011	Total Literacy Rate 2001	Total Literacy Rate 2011
Geographical Area	Lower Assam	52.53	55.38	61.19	67.28
	Central Assam	52.61	56.36	61.16	68.02
	Upper Assam	60.35	62.35	69.23	72.37
All Assam		51.85	67.27	63.25	73.18
All India		53.67	65.46	64.84	74.04

Source: Census of India, 2001 and 2011

Indian women's movement has paved the way for women's continued access to higher education. Current statistics produced by Statistical Hand Book Assam, 2009 suggests that of the total enrollment of students in higher education, the percentage of women stands at 33.63% (Bhattacharyya, 2010). (Table 7)

Table 7
P/C of women enrolled in different subjects

Education Level	Percentage	Education Level	Percentage
Ph. D/M. Phil/D. Phil	42.6	Management	34.27
M.Com	20.1	M. Sc	38.9
B.Com	14.37	B.Sc	16
MBBS	31.14	B.ED	40.07
MA	44.6	LLB	22
B.A	40.13	B.E	9.05

Source: Statistical Hand Book, Assam 2009

It is evident that women accessing higher education are participating in the public sphere as active agents of transformation rather than simply being recipients of higher education. However, these women belong mainly to middle class or upper class of Assamese society. But empowerment should be prerogative to all sections of women. With the launching of programme like *Sarba Shiksha Abhiyan*, Mid-day Meal, Right to Education and so on, there have been spectacular achievement in literacy among girls- with rapid increases in enrolment rates. It is also evident from the statistics that girls are showing more outstanding results in various examinations against the male counterparts. Despite these great efforts to tackle illiteracy, the statistics produced by National Family Survey, India 2008 suggest that in Assam still 30% women within the age group 15-49 have never attended school, while only 19% women have completed at least 10 years of schooling which is ultimately a sad commentary on the advancement of the State.

Whatever may be the level of education, the women of the State are facing the problem of domestic violence. The cases of domestic violence are alarmingly increasing in the State. Further Table 8 reflects the comparative relationship between the level of education and spousal violence. It is observed that there is an inverse relationship between level of education and spousal violence.

Table 8
Level of Education and Spousal Violence (%)

State/Country	Number years of Education			
Education Standard	Illiterate	Less than 8	8 to 9	Below 10
Assam	54	40	29	16
India	47	38	29	16

Source: Provisional data National Family Health Survey, (NFHS-3), 2005-06

C) Demographic Status

Sex ratio is one of the important demographic factors that indicate the status of women in a particular society. A social system with higher sex ratio itself shows the higher status of women. It reflects whether she enjoys those rights to survival, protection and development. In 2001, the male-female ratio in Assam was 1000: 932 which was lower than the all India average of 1000: 933. The position of sex ratio is to some extent improvised in Assam which depicted by the data of Census 2011. The imbalance in the male female ratio is due to blind faith as well as the result of illiteracy which have resulted in destruction of the baby girl at prenatal stage due to sex determination test (which fortunately has been banned by the Government of India), deliberate malnutrition and neglect of the girl child which results in this imbalance.

In Table 9, district wise sex ratio for three years 1991, 2001 and 2011 are taken into account to study the demographic status of women in the state. The sex ratio of Assam is estimated to be 954, which is slightly higher than all India average of 940. It is further observed that sex ratio has increased in the state from 925 in 1991 to 932 in 2001 and 954 in 2011; it has shown the same trend at the all India level during the same period but at a slower rate. For the state of Assam, it is indeed a positive development. It is observed that Central Assam has the highest sex ratio and is higher than that of the state average for both the periods (1991, 2001 and 2011) followed by Lower Assam and Upper Assam.

Table 9
Area, Literacy and Per Capita DDP wise Sex Ratio in Assam

Category		Sex Ratio 1991	Sex Ratio 2001	Sex Ratio 2011
Geographical Area	Lower Assam	928	933	937
	Central Assam	930	940	956
	Upper Assam	915	931	928
All Assam		925	932	954
All India		927	933	940

Source: Census of India, 2001 and 2011

D) Women's Attitude

Another important evidence of empowerment of women is their attitude towards unequal gender role that prevails in the society. It is reported from the various empirical studies that the women's attitude on their status is increasing in the State through their involvement in different economic units viz SHGs, micro enterprise etc. The promotion of SHGs and the awareness programme initiated by various agencies have positively changes their out look and now majority of the women involved in economic units are involved in household decision making. There is a general perception that women accept their subordinate status by themselves, if they believe that wife beating is just or only male child should be given all the opportunities including better education, nutrition etc and female child should be taught to make sacrifice from very childhood, they would be a so called ideal woman. Table 10 shows women's attitude towards wife beating in India and Assam. Less number of women in Assam believes that wife beating is justified in comparison to India as a whole. It is observed from the Table 10 that in Assam, women justify wife beating if they neglect their home and show disrespect to in-laws.

Table 10
Women's attitude towards wife beating in Assam, 2005-06

State/ Country	Percentage of women who believes wife beating to be justified for any of the following specific reasons						
	Not cooking properly	Neglecting children/ Home	Disrespecting in-laws	Suspected by husband as unfaithful	Refusing to have sex with husband	Going out of home without permission of husband	At least one of the specific reasons
Assam	11.0	31.4	32.4	16.4	11.5	23.4	44.5
India	20.4	34.7	40.0	25.1	14.1	29.0	54.4

Source: Govt. of India; NFHS-3

E) Incidence of Domestic Violence

Domestic violence is one of the factors which affect the process of women empowerment. An environment in which women are under threat of continuous violence curtails their ability to control, or even access resources. Unfortunately domestic violence is prevalent in Assam. Despite various legal provisions in the country to protect women against domestic abuse, they are still victims of domestic violence, rape and other forms of atrocities. In Assam too, the cases of violence against women are on the rise. According to Assam State Commission for Women (ASCW) data, between 1994 and 2010, the Commission received 1305 complaints against different types of violence. Of these, the cases of domestic violence topped the list. Since domestic violence is most likely to occur behind closed doors, most of the cases are not reported. Most of the women bear these atrocities for lack of knowledge.

Table 11 shows women's experience of different forms of violence in the state vis-à-vis India in 2005-06. Relatively less women (24.7%) in Assam experience physical violence as compared to all India situations (26.9%). However women of Assam are more prone to both physical and sexual violence (36.5%) than India as a whole (35.4%).

Table 11
Women's experience of different forms of violence, 2005-06

State/ Country	Experience of different forms of violence by women in the age group 15-49 yrs			
	Physical Violence	Sexual violence only	Either physical or sexual violence	Both Physical and sexual violence
Assam	24.7	2.2	9.6	36.5
India	26.9	1.8	6.7	35.4

Source: Govt. of India; NFHS-3

F) Women's Access to Monetary Resource and Credit

Women's access to monetary resource and credit is another important element of empowerment. Employment opportunity of women is necessary but not sufficient condition for financial empowerment. For economic empowerment control over resources is more important. There are a few government level organisations/institutions and NGOs which are working for the development of micro enterprises for the women in the region. However, a concerted effort by such institutions and organisations has not been noticed so far in the North East. It is observed that finance is one of the key factors for entrepreneurial development for women. Lately, micro financing is a major tool for development of women enterprises. The micro-financing sector in North-East India has recently begun to grow rapidly. This is mainly due to active engagement of NGOs, public and private sector banks, financial institutions etc. During the year 2008-09, NEDFI alone has been providing micro finance to 23,418 beneficiaries, out of which 21,033 beneficiaries were women (i.e. 89.8 per cent). Today there are more than 360 NGOs in the region providing micro-financial services to the people, especially to the lower income women groups in the region (NEDFI, 2009). Sustained long run achievement of empowerment of women would become a reality if necessary changes in the socio-economic, political and cultural changes take place.

Table 12 shows women's access to these resources in case of India and Assam. From the table, it is clear that

women in Assam have less financial autonomy as compared to all India level.

Table 12
Women's Access to money and Credit in Assam 2005-06

India/States	Percentage of Women having	
	Access to money and its use	Bank A/C and its use
India	44.6	15.0
Assam	26.9	11.7

Source: Govt. of India; NFHS -3

G) Health

Women in Assam have limited access to health care services. The percentage of women in Assam receiving antenatal checkups is 5% behind the rest of India and 8% behind the other North Eastern states. Deliveries assisted by health professionals in Assam are half of that received by the rest of India. The percentage of women suffering from anemia is also very high. Maternal mortality is reported to be amongst the highest in Assam as against the rest of the country. However, it is important to note that the percentage of women who take decisions regarding their own health care, in Assam, is relatively higher than several other states and stands at 65%.

The recent statistics produced by Nutrition in India, National Family Health Survey, 2008 demonstrates that in Assam more than 60% of women within the age group 15-49 years are anemic, the rate being much higher than the other states of NER like Manipur, Mizoram, Meghalaya and even Arunachal Pradesh. The report also suggests that more than half of all women in Assam are malnourished. (Fred Arnold et al., 2009)

H) Political Participation

The participation of women in the decision making process initially began with the *Swadeshi* Movement in Bengal (1905-08). Joining of Gandhi in Indian National Congress resulted in greater women participation. Thousands of women joined in the Salt Satyagraha, which is 'generally remembered as the first time', 'masses of Indian women' got involved in the struggle for independence" (Kumar, 1995). However, it is further observed that their participation in active politics is not so impressive and only the higher caste women were involved in the politics. In the first ever general election, their strength was only 22 (4.4%) in the House. Women's representation steadily rose in the next general election to reach 34 (6.7%) in the third *Lok Sabha* and so on. (Table 13)

The Indian Constitution gives equal political rights to both men and women, but the representation of women in Parliament and State Legislatures is very less. The 81st Constitutional Amendment Bill to provide for one-third reservation for women in Parliament was tabled for the first time in 1996 but was soon engulfed in the conflicts over the demand of special quota for women of other Backward Castes and Minorities. Till today there are no sincere efforts on the part of national and regional political parties towards the passing of the Bill.

Table 13
Participation of Women in General Election

Year of Election	No	P/C	Year of Election	No	P/C
1952	22	4.4	1984	44	8.1
1957	27	5.4	1989	27	5.29
1962	34	6.7	1991	39	7.07
1967	31	5.9	1996	40	7.36
1971	22	4.2	1998	44	8.07
1977	19	3.4	2004	49	9.02
1980	28	5.1	2009	69	12.02

Source: Election Commission of India.

It is observed In the *Lok Sabha* elections the participation of female candidates is not so praiseworthy. Only from 1996 onwards a good number of women candidates participated as contesting candidate in *Lok Sabha* elections. It is observed that only two women MP's are elected from Assam in 1999 & 2009. Further, it is observed that participation of women in *Lok Sabha* election from Assam is much higher than national average (Election Commission of India Report, 2009).

Table 14
Lok Sabha Election & Women Participation in Assam

Year	No of Female Candidates	Wim	Year	No of Female Candidates	Wim
1977	3	2	1996	9	1
1980	2	0	1999	9	2
1984	0	0	2004	6	0
1989	0	0	2009	11	2
1991	7	0			

Source: Election Commission of India

The participation of women in *Rajya Sabha* is very minimal. Since its first elections only a few get the opportunity to represent in the *Rajya Sabha*. It is observed from the figures supplied by Election Commission that only in 1994 and 1996, only one female member represented from Assam in the *Rajya Sabha*. In the present *Rajya Sabha* no single women is there from Assam.

Assam has 126 constituencies but the participation of women in the State Legislative Assembly is not improved. The numbers of contested candidates compared to its male counterparts is very low. During the period of 1952 and 1985 the number of contested women candidates ranged between 4 and 20, while as compared to the P/C of the number of male contestants being 0.99% and 2.18% respectively. In terms of contesting candidates the number was highest (20) in the election of 1978, but only one candidate was managed to win. During the period of 1972 & 1978 the P/C of women legislators were .02% & 0.79% respectively. The position is a little improvised in the 1996

election and 45 female candidates filed their candidatures & only 6 managed to win. In the Assembly election of 2006, the number increased to 69. However, they are still lagging behind the male, where 928 male candidates were contested for the same. Again, in that election 69 constituencies did not have any female candidates. In 2011 Assam Assembly Election, 85 female candidates filed their nomination and 14 managed to win (Election Commission of India Report, 2011). However, as compared to its some neighboring state, Assam has a better position in terms of women participation.

It is therefore, observed that women in this State lagging behind the men in the political arena. The Political parties of Assam which depend on feminine charm to woo voters during elections, have failed miserably in providing a greater opportunity to participate in the decision making process. It is worth mentioning here that, not only the political parties but also the common people are not in favour to bring women in power. The number of winner in either the *Lok Sabha* or Assembly election clearly reflects the intension of the people of Assam, that they do not want women Parliamentarians or MLAs.

5. Violence Against Women in Assam & India

Violence in general is a coercive mechanism to assert one's will over another, in order to prove or feel a sense of power. It can be perpetrated by those in power against the powerless, or by the powerless in retaliation which attempts to deny their powerlessness.

There are different forms of violence which are directed specifically against women - rape, sexual harassment, sexual exploitation as in prostitution, sexual debasement as in pornography, domestic violence ranging from battery to torture and even death. All these spring from the structure of patriarchy, defined broadly as a system of male dominance legitimated within the family and society through superior rights, privileges, authority and power. The degree and forms of expression of patriarchy vary from society to society. The

types of violence against women cover a wide range: domestic violence including dowry deaths, honour killings, rape, widow immolation (*sati*), child marriage, female infanticide and foeticide, forced prostitution including temple prostitution, 'eve-teasing,' sexual harassment in public places by lewd remarks, pinching, pawing, sexual abuse in work place etc., and pornography. There are several types of violence which are culture specific to India includes sati, dowry deaths, honour killings, and the use of sex determination tests for female foeticide.

Until recently, domestic violence was not regarded as a crime, and women victims had no legal redress except through divorce proceedings. It is only recently that amendments to the Indian Penal Code (IPC) and Criminal Procedure Code (CRPC) made the requisite provisions, but these were mainly applied in cases treated as dowry deaths. In view of the increasing incidence of domestic violence against women, Government of India enacted the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005 (PWDVA). The legislation has come into force with effect from 26th October, 2006 and provides for more effective protection to women victims against violence of any kind occurring within the family.

Data collected by North East Network, (NEO, 2004), however, suggest that violence against women, particularly domestic violence, is on the rise in the North East Region. Moreover, the ongoing armed conflict situation prevalent in the North East of India has intensified the violence faced by women which takes the form of sexual, mental or physical abuse or killings and clashes.

A total of 2, 03,804 incidents of crime against women (both under IPC and SLL) were reported in the country during 2009 as compared to 1,54,333 during 2004, recording an increase of 32.05% during the five years. The details of different types of crimes are depicted in the Table 15.

Table 15
Crime Head-wise Incidents of Crime against Women

Crime Heads	YEAR					
	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Rape (Sec. 376 IPC)	18,233	18,359	19,348	20,737	21,467	21,397
Kidnapping & Abduction. (Sec. 363 to 373 IPC)	15,578	15,750	17,414	20,416	22,939	25,741
Dowry Death (Sec. 302 / 304 IPC)	7,026	6,787	7,618	8,093	8,172	8,383
Torture (Sec. 498-A IPC)	58,121	58,319	63,128	75,930	81,344	89,546
Molestation (Sec. 354 IPC)	34,567	34,175	36,617	38,734	40,413	38,711
Sexual Harassment (Sec. 509 IPC)	10,001	9,984	9,966	10,950	12,214	11,009
Importation of Girls (Sec. 366-B IPC)	89	149	67	61	67	48
Sati Prevention Act, 1987	0	1	0	0	1	0
Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956	5,748	5,908	4,541	3,568	2,659	2,474
Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986	1,378	2,917	1,562	1,200	1,025	845
Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961	3,592	3,204	4,504	5,623	5,555	5,650
Total	1,54,333	1,55,553	1,64,765	1,85,312	195856	2,03,804

Source: Various publications of National Crime Record Bureau, Govt. of India

The rate of crime has increased marginally from 16.3% during the year 2007 to 17.0% during 2008. It is reported from the source that the IPC component of crimes against women has accounted for 95.3% of total crimes and the rest 4.7% were SLL crimes against women (Table 16). The proportion of IPC crimes committed against women towards total IPC crimes has increased continually during last 5 years from 7.8% in 2004 to 9.2% during 2009.

Table 16
Proportion of Crime against Women (IPC) towards total IPC crimes

Year	Total IPC Crimes	Crime Against women (IPC cases)	Percentage to total IPC crimes
2004	18,32,015	1,43,615	7.8
2005	18,22,602	1,43,523	7.9
2006	18,78,293	1,54,158	8.2
2007	19,89,673	1,74,921	8.8
2008	20,93,379	1,86,617	8.9
2009	21,21,345	2,03,804	9.2

Source: Various publications of National Crime Record Bureau.

It is also reported that the rates of crimes against women in Assam is also increasing at an alarmingly high rate. (Table 17). The overall level of crimes including crime against women is going up with every passing year. According to records provided by the Government of Assam, the incidents of rape are going up in the State every year. The concerning authority of the State recorded 1203 rape cases in 2006 and the figure went up to 1310 in 2007, 1419 in 2008 and 1631 in 2009. As a whole, the State recorded 1610 rape cases up to the end of November last year. Similarly, the cases involving dowry are also going up in Assam. The concerning authority of the State recorded 2548 dowry cases in 2006 and the figure went up to 3000 in 2007, 3410 in 2008 and 4355 in 2009. Up to the end of November last year, the State recorded 4811 dowry cases showing an average rate of 22% (approx.) during the 4 years.

Table 17
Statement of Crime against women in Assam

Heads of Crime	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010 (upto July)
Rape (Sec. 376 IPC)	1217	1203	1310	1419	1269	575
Trafficking	25	22	23	33	41	17
Dowry related Deaths (Sec. 302 / 304 IPC)	99	105	100	70	142	65
Cruelty by Husband	2205	2548	3000	3410	4355	2010
Kidnapping of Women/ Girls (Sec. 363 to 373 IPC)	1456	1549	1471	1613	1906	1024
Molestation (Sec. 354 IPC)	899	1290	789	1368	1389	593
Total	5901	6717	6693	7913	9102	4284

Source: DIG CID, Assam.

The statistics produced by National Crime Records Bureau, 2008 demonstrates that the rate of crime against women in Assam is 27%. Strikingly, Crime Records Bureau fails to record statistics related to street sexual harassment i.e. eve teasing against women. Recent research (Bhattacharyya, 2010) on eve teasing demonstrates that women are eve-teased in the streets of Assam every 51 minutes, and in this way shackles their freedom of mobility. Undoubtedly, ubiquity of such malaise is 'a wall of shame' for Assam and the people of Assam as a whole.

Table 18
P/C of Crime Committed Against Women in Assam

Heads of Crime	P/C share of Assam
Cruelty by Husband	11.28
Hurt	19.8
Dowry Deaths	.33
Causing to death by negligence	4.1
Molestation	7.3
Other Crimes	57.1

Source: National Crime Bureau, 2008

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

Strengthening women's initiative in light of the above, certain measures could be taken up to mitigate problems faced by women's in the state:

- Education of women is the foremost requirement in improving the status of women in the society. An educated woman can face the vagaries of life without any fear. Education creates modern outlook among women which in turn strengthens their claim for better status in the society.
- Providing economic security is a must. As long as women feel insecure, she cannot come up in life. Therefore, the most important thing is to impart education and self

employment to women and to make them economically independent. Economic independence creates confidence and provides social security.

- Participation of women is low not only in the elected bodies but also in administrative posts. The over-all picture seems to be quite dismal. However, there are much possibilities and potential for increased participation of women of Assam in the national mainstream. Some strategic approaches for improving women's status in Assam can be taken up.

- Developing positive attitude towards women is necessary. Women's empowerment would be achieved only when the attitudes-ways of thinking, feeling and willing-as also ways of behaving of men, women and society towards women become congenial and positive. This will help in implementing the Governments actions & steps for removing gender inequalities, injustices and for empowering women.

- There is an urgent need to create awareness among the women in particular, of the social evils of the society. Women are so much cocooned by various social customs and taboos, that they often cannot and do not want to bring changes in their own traditional lifestyles, so there is a need for creating socio-political consciousness among women.

- The extent of violence against women and children is still not acknowledged and thus as a first step, it is essential to study the trends in violence against women, analyse its causes and to gather to whatever extent possible, statistical figures on crimes against women.

- Statutory provisions needs to be formulated to appoint a nodal official in each workplace who shall look after the issues relating to VAW in the respective workplace. The official shall act as liaison officer and shall communicate directly with the preventive officers/supervisors, of the district concerned to redress the complaints of the victims, if any.

- Budgetary Allocation is crucial for purposes of strengthening existing support services for violated women and establishing new ones in the region. It is of public knowledge that 10% of every Department's budget is earmarked for the north east region of India. A portion of this budget could well be utilized for strengthening these services. Investment should be made on additional support services in shelter homes like extending it to counseling units and a space for recuperation
- Training and professional development is essential for professionals who come into contact with women subjected to violence. There is an urgent need for training to strengthen the understanding of VAW amongst support givers. There is a need to ensure culturally appropriate services for women who are victims and survivors of violence.
- Studies need to be conducted to analyse the effectiveness of current preventative measures, including government policies to address issues relating to violence against women.

In fine, violence against women requires a multi-pronged effort. It requires raising the awareness of women regarding their rights, but more importantly, providing a strong support system for women in distress. At present, there are several women's organizations in large cities, which provide temporary shelter, moral support, legal aid, assistance in getting jobs, etc. There are also the traditional organizations which provide rescue homes for women, but which usually do not emphasize economic self-reliance for women. A trend has, however, started for running training programmes, legal literacy classes, etc. Such support centers are too few to handle the large number of victimized women. Education through the mass media, schools, and informal groups must emphasize the rights of women, and simultaneously reorient boys and men to their responsibilities and their obligation to treat women as equals. These will not change society overnight. Providing independent means of livelihood for women, playing down the notion of marriage as the only

destiny for women, and equalizing power relations in the hierarchical family structure have to accompany other efforts. Sensitization of the legislators, police, government officials and the legal system of the country will need to be done.

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