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MUSLIM WOMEN AND EMPOWERMENT

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ABSTRACT

Gender equality and women empowerment are the growing issues in these days. The 3rd goal of Millennium Development Goal is to promote gender equality and empowerment. The basic indicators of status of empowerment of women are access to education, decision making power, employment etc. It is often the minority community who were at disadvantage position in society. Women in the Muslim communities fare badly too. They are not just a minority, but the marginalised majority. There are numbers of problems and grievances of Muslim women. The Muslim backwardness in the country can evidently see as they lack behind the majority community both educationally and economically. This paper is an attempt to study the scenario of empowerment of the Muslim women in Hailakandi district of Assam. It seeks to contribute with new insights into their social and economic life and suggest measures to bridge the gap between men and women in Muslim communities.

KEYWORDS

empowerment, gender, minority, women.

INTRODUCTION

Assam is the second largest state in the north eastern part of India, with a geographical area of 78,438 sq km. It provides shelter to 2.57 percent of the population of the country. The sex ratio of the state is 954 and the percentage share of the female population is 49 percent. Although the female population constitute almost half of the population but they are not equally empowered as the other half population. The condition is more grim in case of minority communities. Among them Muslims constitute the largest minority community. They are not only the largest minority community, but their presence is visible in all the States and Union Territories.

TABLE 1

Name of Religion	Percentage to total population	Sex ratio
Hindus	80.5	931
Muslims	13.4	936
Christians	2.3	1009
Sikhs	1.9	893
Buddhists	0.8	953
Jains	0.4	940
Other Religions	0.6	992
India	100	933

Source: Census of India, 2011

Socio-economic condition is an important indicator to know the status of empowerment of any community. It is often the minority community who were at disadvantage position in society. In India it is evident that most of the communal riots occurred between the majority and minority groups. Muslims are the most vulnerable minority group in India. It is found that the status of muslim women in a country, particularly those from the disadvantaged sections of the society, is unfavourable. A girl child suffers from discrimination even before birth and also after birth in the allocation of household resources such as food, education, access to health care and at puberty, coerced into early marriage. Most women in the rural areas suffer from double burden of carrying out less visible work like cooking, fetching water, sending children to school, agricultural labour, feeding cattle, milking cows etc., while the men folk perform visible activities like selling milk and grains produced by the household.

Some issues need to be given more attention than they have been so far, namely-

- Women's access to and control over natural resources like land, water and forests. Much more concrete action needs to be taken at the level of policies and programmes to give women access and control over these resources.
- Sharing of household work by men and boys. (Bhasin 2003)

Women in the muslim communities fare badly too. They are not just a minority, but the marginalised majority and are sidelined in decision making in the family, and usually cut-off from a full involvement in the workings of the society and from an equal share in the society's rewards. Equality between men and women is essential for building just and peaceful relationships within families and communities. Women and men everywhere have to join hands to achieve gender equality, and to create a world which is just and peaceful for all. Mainly Poverty, early marriage, malnutrition and lack of health care during pregnancy are the major reasons for both maternal and infant mortality especially among them. In rural India almost 60 per cent of girls are married before they are 18. Nearly 60 per cent of married girls bear children before they are 19. Almost one third of all babies are born with low birth weight. Social restrictions on women's mobility also contribute to lesser healthcare for women.

There are numbers of problems and grievances of minorities in general and Muslims in particular, some delicate and some complex, some real and some perceptible. The Muslim backwardness in the country can evidently see as they lack behind the majority community both educationally and economically. A major reason for the subordination, lack of autonomy and ill-health among women is the extreme burden of household work. More recently, many people have been working towards increasing women's participation in governance at all levels. Yet most working class women are already on the verge of the collapse due to overwork. Women's roles as housewives and mothers force them into subordinate position in paid employment. If we want women managers, politicians and civil society leaders then we need more men to be mothers, care-takers, nurses and cooks.

There are two commonly prevalent explanations regarding educational backwardness among Muslim women in contemporary society. One explanation is that they have been slow to take advantage of governmental liberal policy regarding education since the independence due to their particular attitude towards cultural ethos. There has been a slow tendency of the Muslims to respond positively modern technical and professional education. Presently Muslims in comparison to other communities are almost proportionately equal in the pursuit of modern education but still they lack behind in terms of the acquisition of professional and technical education.

Another major problem facing the minorities specially women are the communal riots from time to time. Regardless of which sites starts the riot, the women generally suffers a lot in terms of lives lost and property destroyed. Nowadays, racial tensions, communal violence and ethnic clashes make headlines almost daily which have put a major obstacle in the way of economic development of the country. The Indian Muslims today find it extremely difficult to come out of economic backwardness and lack of modernization backwardness syndrome.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The proposed study is primarily concerned with an assessment of the socio-economic condition of the minority women in Assam to know their empowerment status. It seeks to contribute with new insights into their social and economic life. The main objectives of the study are:

- To study the present scenario of socio-economic status of the Muslim women.
- To know the basic needs of Muslim women at local level.
- To suggest measures to bridge the gap between men and women in Muslim communities.

MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

The proposed study is based on both primary and secondary data. For the collection of primary data structured questionnaires are used. This study aims to highlight the socio economic conditions of muslim women to know their empowerment status. But due to time constraint we cover only the Muslim community in Hailakandi District of Assam.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

In this paper, to know the empowerment status of muslim women, we used the socio-economic indicators such as income, education, employment, better health etc. At the same time women must have a share in the decision making process in the family and also in the society.

Education is a critical input in the process of development. Education is essential in case of both social and economic perspective. It is regarded as an important tool to reducing the gender gap in the society and yet the education of women did not receive the adequate attention for various historical and social reasons and stands out as a major problem in the all round development of society. During the last decades education has changed radically the lives of woman. But still gender differences in education are found which affects the lives of women in a negative manner. The condition is more grim in case of muslim women. In our study, among 50 samples, 17% women are found to be illiterate. Most of them are studied up to M.E level (29%) and 26% are studied up to primary level. 17% of women are studied up to 9th standard whereas only 11 % are found to study up to H.S.L.C. and H.S. level. As a whole 83 % of women are literate, this shows a positive picture of the status of minority women. But the percentage of highly educated women is quite low which is a major drawback in case of educational attainment. Moreover it has been seen that girl children are not encourage to go to school and remain uneducated. Their space is limited to household activities only.

To know one's economic status, employment is the basic indicator. The economic empowerment increases one's capability and ability to make own decisions in different spheres of life. Financial autonomy of women is one of the crucial dimensions towards women empowerment. It transfers the real economic power in the hands of women and thus it tends to reduce women's dependence. In our survey, we found that 25% women are working lady and the rest are housewives. Only 3 women are working in Govt. sector. However, it is found that most of the women are a member of a Self Help Group. So, we came to know that Self Help Groups play a very important role in improving socio-economic status of minority women. As women are vulnerable to credit constraints, the SHGs play as a medium in mobilization and allocation of micro-credit. Though 25% of women are working, but only 10% of these women have bank accounts.

Effective participation of women in politics is an important step in engendering women empowerment. It is an important means to overcome social maladies. Women are marginalized in the political process by suppression, socialisation and sabotage. In case of political participation, it is found that 80% of women cast their vote. So from the political point of view, they are very active. But casting vote doesn't mean that they are independent of their political choice. Decision making power is another important indicator of women's status in the society. In our study, 22% of them have their own household decision making power. But it's found that their role in decision making is always secondary. Women's confidence and self-esteem increase when they have greater knowledge, economic assets and income-earning capacity, and they are more likely to participate in both private and public decision-making.

Again in case of awareness regarding government schemes, we found most of them are ignorant. 69% of women do not know about the availability of various government schemes. Also among the rest 31 %, maximum do not know the exact formalities and procedures of the government schemes. Only 29% of women have 1 to 2 children, 34% have 3 to 5 children and 23% have more than 5 children and the rest have no child. It is found that most of them i.e. 57% have above 3 children which shows their religious attitude towards children. In a country like India, discrimination against girl child is an issue of concern. In case of minority the problem is quite acute. Since we took the rural Muslim women for our study, it is found that they are superstitious too. There are many reasons like our customs and traditions which make the women superstitious.

If we come to conclude the empowerment status of muslim women in terms of the above indicators, then we may come to the conclusion that empowerment status of muslim women is good. As per 2011 census, female literacy rate in Assam is 67.27 which is less than our result of the survey. Again, the workforce participation rate for the urban female is 16.1 and for rural female is 13.8 in Assam for the period of 1999-2000 as per socio-economic statistics, India(2001). But the reality may be different. Empowerment of women needs quality education and at the same time enrolment in higher education matters a lot. In our survey, the workforce participation rate of muslim women is also satisfactory. But as their rate of enrolment to higher education is very low, they are not in a high ranked job. Therefore an assessment of their empowerment in terms of the socio-economic indicators may not provide an adequate picture

CONCLUSION AND POLICY SUGGESTION

In the conclusion it should say that gender equality is very much essential in every community. It is now widely recognised that for developing a nation, women should be empowered. Gender equality is required not only in case of social, economic and political point of view; but also in terms of decision making. Women must be subjects, not objects or just beneficiaries of development policies and programmes. Women are not only the home-makers, they have their own likes and dislikes. Thus gender equality is very much essential concept which means not only understanding but also challenging patriarchy and other inter-connected hierarchies like those of caste, class, race etc. For that the age-old ideas and superstitions needs to be changed. Minorities are the most neglected section of the society and so are the minority women. The Government should formulate and implement effective policy for improving this disadvantaged section of the society. The benefits of the programmes or policies should also needs to be decentralized. For these the Government should scrutinize the implementing machineries at the grass root level.

LIMITATION

In this study we took only 50 samples from Three Development Block of Hailakandi District of Assam. Apart from this we only study the socio-economic status of Muslim women. So, this study may not represent the original scenario of empowerment status of Muslim Women in Assam.

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