

Social Employability and Entrepreneurship Among the Marginalized Women in Char Chapori Areas of Assam

Dr. Sabrin Arifa¹, Dr. Irfan Ullah²

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Science and Technology, Meghalaya

²Assistant Professor, Assam Institute of Management, Guwahati, Assam

Abstract:

This study will primarily focus on the economic condition of the women in riverine areas of Assam and how they have come forward with plethora of ideas for sustainable development and entrepreneurship. The study shall also touch the issues of domestic violence and child marriage and what measures are taken or can be taken to prevent these. Although it is said that development is gender neutral but with significantly illiterate women there can never be development in true sense in the grassroot level.

There is also a common belief that Muslim parents feel that education is not important for girls and that it may instill a wrong set of values. Even if girls are enrolled, they are withdrawn at an early age to marry them off. This leads to a high drop-out rate among Muslim girls. It was also found that the non-availability of schools within easy reach for girls at lower levels of education, absence of girl's hostels, absence of female teachers and non-availability of scholarships as they move up the education ladder, are the main reasons behind their educational backwardness (Sachar, 2006).

In this context, employed women is a far-off dream for women belonging to Muslim community of the marginalized and deprived section of the society. Hence it is very important to know and understand how a particular section of women is able to sustain while getting involved in social entrepreneurship and managing their own finances.

**“Don’t sit down and wait for the opportunities to come-
Get up and Make them.”**

Madam C.J. Walker

Introduction:

With employment comes empowerment. This is true in the sense because in Indian society we often see the male counterparts of the family earns money, gets employed in various jobs and hence they have the power of making decisions in the family. The defined or designed social role in the family structure is such that men must go out to work and women stay at home to look after children and do the domestic chores. This is the traditional and accepted form of social living. And with a dominant patriarchal society, the status of women is pathetic especially in the rural areas.

Dr. APJ Kalam quotes, “Empowering women is a prerequisite for creating a good nation, when women are empowered, a society with stability is assured. It shall lead to the development of a good family, good society and ultimately a good nation.” Position of women in society today is precarious as they face various

challenges in education, health, domestic life, political leadership, safety in public spaces and at the workplace. Efforts are being made since independence to attain the Constitutional mandate of equality for all.

According to the World Bank, women constitute to be 48.42% in 2023, among the total population of India and the gender gap is just 0.64 index score. Yet we can see that they not only face discrimination but experience different types of violence in job, family life, society etc. (Rumani 2023). They are considered to be the weaker section of the society although they can be or have potential to become the Better Sex. This is mostly because of their dependency on men due to which they face marginalization (Siddiqi and Ranganatha, 2001). This dependency can be financial, social, educational, legal, political, awareness, skills and so on. If these can be overcome, then the lives of women will not only improve but the entire society will develop. Even if there is scope for education or employment yet the decision-making power is not given to the women directly. It is affected directly or indirectly by social norms, constraints, societal restrictions and so on.

Status of Women's employment in different regions:

As per the Female Labour Utilization in India, around 39.3% females of age group 15-59 years in rural areas were in labour force during 2021-22 whereas in urban areas only 26.5 females were in labour force. Women's participation in the employment scale is low due to various factors such as education, fertility rates, economic development, access to childcare, supportive services and finally cultural and normative context of society and social norms. These factors react as 'Push and Pull factors' for female participation in employment.

We can see social designations for men and women such as **Female Homemaker** norm and **Male Breadwinner** norm which is assigned by the society for both the gender. Along with these, certain factors such as unpaid household chores or care work overburden women's physical capability to do work, salary or wages is always less for a woman in comparison to man for the same work is another discouraging factor for women to participate for employment. (Employment Statistics in Focus- April 2023).

Social Status of Women in the state of Assam

The state of Assam which is considered to be gateway for Northeast is a home for numerous communities and heterogeneous society. As per the report of the Technical Group by the National Commission, the population of Assam is projected to be 36,159,000, or 36.16 million, or 3.62 crore, as of July 1, 2024. Assam is the 14th most populous state in India. It is the largest state in northeastern India in terms of population. Assam's population is projected to reach 3.95 crore in 2036.

The size of the population of Assam is equivalent to that of Uzbekistan, the 43rd most populous country in the world.

In 2024, the sex ratio of the total population in Assam was 103.472 males per 100 females. There are 18,388,000, or 18.39 million, or 1.84 crore, males and 17,771,000, or 17.77 million, or 1.78 crore, females in Assam. Assam has 617,000 more males than females.

As per 2011 census, Hindus are majority in the state. Hinduism constitutes 61.47% of Assam population and form majority religion in 18 out of 27 districts of Assam state.

Muslim Population in Assam is 1.07 Crore (34.22 percent) of total 3.12 Crore. Christian Population in Assam is 11.66 Lakhs (3.74 percent) of total 3.12 Crore.

Muslims play an important role in electoral of Assam state forming significant 34.22% of total population. Islam is followed with majority in 9 out of 27 districts.

The districts in Assam where Muslim people reside in majority are Nagaon, Dhubri, Barpeta, Karimganj, Goalpara, Morigaon, Darrang, Bongaigaon and Hailakandi.

So, this place fondly called as ‘Shankar- Azaanor desh’ is a place where one-third of the population follows Islam and they can be broadly categorized into two groups:

1. Assamese Speaking Muslims
2. Bengali Speaking Muslims

Again, the Assamese speaking Muslim people are politically denoted as the indigenous Muslims of Assam and they can be further divided into the following groups such as:

Syeds, Goriya, Moriya, Deshi and Julha (Hussain, 2021).

Also, other scholars have made divisions of Muslims in Assam into four categories:

1. The Assamese Muslims
2. The Neo-Assamese Muslims
3. The Muslims of Cachar or Barak Valley
4. The Bihari or North-Indian Muslims living in Assam

Rural and urban are the two broad socio-economic categories of the Muslim communities of Assam like other communities and about 95 percent of the total Muslim population of Assam living in the rural areas. (Rabindra Das, 2014)

There is a rise among the Bengali speaking Muslim population and as per 2011 census, they constitute around 63% of total Muslim population as compared to the indigenous Assamese speaking Muslims of Assam. This is where the stereotyping of Muslims is taking place where Bengali origin Muslims are termed as ‘Miyah Muslims’. And their status in the everyday political scenario of Assam is framed with a radically dogmatic perspective. They often face the visual identity abuse due to attributes like dressing style, language, culture, underdevelopment, beard, lungi (sarong). These people have to fight their identity and are often termed as ‘doubtful Bangladeshi’. (Pathan and Jha, 2022)

“Miyah” is a matrix within which fall the descendants of people who migrated from Tangali, Pabna, Mymensingh, Dhaka and other districts of present-day Bangladesh. However, there is a clear angle to this equation. An educated Bengali-origin Assamese Muslim who also speaks Assamese might be able to camouflage his "Miyahness." “Since I am university educated and speak decent Assamese, I might not be called a Miyah, at least until I make it explicit. My cousin, on the other hand, who drives a rickshaw in Guwahati, will always be one. My class privilege might immunise me from the feelings of disgust reserved for my cousin.” (Chaudhary, 2019)

As we can see the disparity, negligence, rejection or in many cases hurl of abuses through physical, verbal and social way for this category of people, we can only imagine the condition of the women in the community. From belonging to a marginalized underdeveloped section and again in the female category, they face double discrimination. So, it is not only deprivation and economic restrains, but they must also fight from other severe challenges. They undergo the restrictions of patriarchy, no access to modern education, rigidity towards religious practices, food, control over dressing style, limited access to exposures and opportunities. This also leads to health issues, malnutrition, financial crisis and so on. And above that, they live in places with the worst geographical location with natural insecurity such as devastating flood, agriculturally lowlands. (Duwarah, 2024)

Objectives of the Study:

This study will primarily focus on the economic condition of the women in riverine areas and how they have come forward with plethora of ideas for sustainable development and entrepreneurship. The study shall also touch the issues of domestic violence and child marriage and what measures are taken or can be taken to prevent these.

The main objectives are laid down and can be summarized as follows:

1. To study how women in riverine areas of Assam are building innovative ideas for a better livelihood both socially and economically.
2. To study the role and status of women while decision-making both in and outside the house, before and after they had an active income.
3. To study if there is any changing pattern of the male outlook after financial stability among women.

Research Methodology:

This research holds a Narrative Approach under Qualitative research. The research design is exploratory in nature. The paper includes qualitative research methods. The data collection will be from primary as well as secondary data. The techniques that have been used are:

- Interview
- Questionnaire

The sample is around 70 women under non-probability sampling design. The method chosen is judgemental sampling. This study has specifically chosen Muslim women living in the Char- Chapori areas of Brahmaputra.

Area of Study:

The universe for the study is Jania which is a large village located in Baghbor Circle of Barpeta district, Assam with a total of 1263 families residing. The total population of this village is 6468 of which 3353 are males while 3115 are females as per Population Census 2011 (Assam State Census 2011).

The area considered for this study is riverine area in Jania Chowk, Barpeta district mainly resided by Bengali speaking Miyah Muslims.

This mainly belongs to Char- Chapori area of Assam. The formation of Char-Chapori is very complex. Usually, Chars are inside the river and Chapori are on the bank of the river Brahmaputra (Biswas, 2011). It can be stated that backwardness, illiteracy and extreme poverty are all linked with Char areas. According to Bhagawati (2005) the Char dwellers are economically poor, culturally backward and many of them live a kind of nomadic life. He has also rightly maintained that char dwellers have to change their settlements often because of unpredictable river erosion of Brahmaputra River. Thus, they are termed as river nomads. (A.K. Bhagawati:2005)

Significance of the Study:

Although it is said that development is gender neutral but with significantly illiterate women there can never be development in true sense in the grassroot level.

The educational status of Muslim women in India is worse than that of Muslim men. A study done by Zaya Hassan and Ritu Menon, highlights important issues related to the status of Muslim women in India. This survey was conducted in 2000-2001, covering 40 districts in 12 states. Although all women suffer gender-based inequities in marriage, autonomy and mobility across communities, Muslim women fare

lower than the national average in certain key areas. These include socio-economic status, occupational distribution/labour force participation, and education (Hassan and Menon, 2004).

There is also a common belief that Muslim parents feel that education is not important for girls and that it may instil a wrong set of values. Even if girls are enrolled, they are withdrawn at an early age to marry them off. This leads to a high drop-out rate among Muslim girls. It was also found that the non-availability of schools within easy reach for girls at lower levels of education, absence of girl's hostels, absence of female teachers and non-availability of scholarships as they move up the education ladder, are the main reasons behind their educational backwardness (Sachar, 2006).

In this context, employed women is a far-off dream for women belonging to Muslim community of the marginalized and deprived section of the society. Hence it is very important to know and understand how a particular section of women is able to sustain while getting involved in social entrepreneurship and managing their own finances.

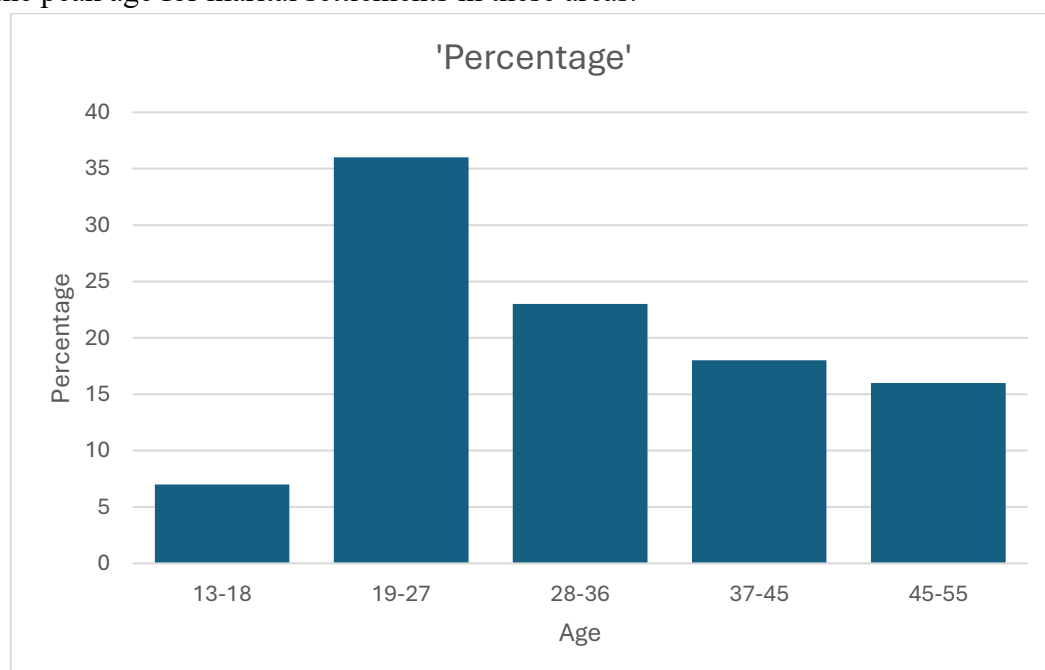
Theoretical perspective:

It can be seen from the analysis of social identity theory of the section of people that was selected as respondents. They have a face dual discrimination of being minority as a community and females as their gender. After becoming self-sufficient through employment and entrepreneurship, they can fight against certain prejudices, discrimination and domestic conflicts. They have gained assurance and self-esteem as members of the society which otherwise were treated with contempt. As per Marxist feminist theory these women were exploited against the fact that they were considered as burden in the family and encouraged to do only household unpaid work or bear children and look after them. It was also due to the social class system that these oppressions were overlooked.

Data Analysis and Findings:

The data findings and analysis has been discussed below.

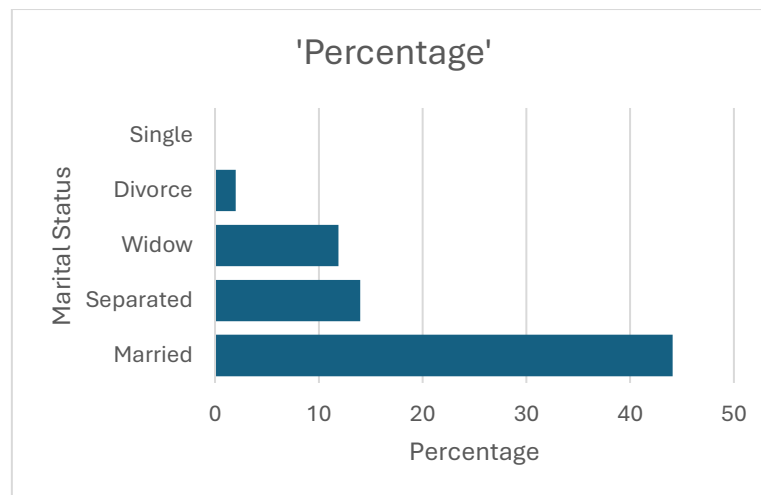
1. The respondents chosen is from the age of 10-55 years with a maximum of 19-27 years old because this is the peak age for marital settlements in these areas.



However, it can be seen that people prefer child marriage to a large extent because education is not considered very important specially among the girls. Marriage is something regarded as one of the highest seen social institutions among this community.

2. All the respondents were Muslims and speak Bengali language.
It was done on purpose as the study focused on this particular group.

3. The graph for marital status:



We can see most of the women are married, there were number of women who were separated along with widow women. A smaller number of women were divorced and no unmarried women could be recognized in the sampling process.

- The monthly income of the family of these respondents were in between 5000-15000 rupees. This is earned mainly through selling vegetables or working as daily wage labourers.
- Most of the women never attended school but they did informal primary education or vocational training. They can write their names and do basic calculations. Girls usually are not sent to schools as they are required at home to do household chores or look after their younger siblings.
- The family size is usually bigger than average. Most of the families prefer to have more than 3 children up to 7 children. They believe that a greater number of children is better as they all can earn money for the family. Plus the use of contraceptives is still a taboo. The reproductive section of the women is usually controlled by the men.
- The women under study had gone through domestic violence or some form of abuse which made them realize if they earn and bring income, their social status may increase and these abuses may get reduced.
- The main motivation to start entrepreneurship was peer and also financial crisis, using their long-lost skills to have some basic income. The women of this area informed that during Covid lockdown, domestic violence and abuse went up and women became unable to tolerate the tensed economic as well as family issues. Hence whenever there was any financial aid or food being provided, they desire to have a stable income or some kind of initiative to start earning rather than one time aid provided. They needed some start-up idea. Hence when they realized that they were able to do a particular stitch

and make certain sustainable commodities, these women chose to become entrepreneurs rather than stay at home wives/mothers.

9. When questioned about how they feel working, they said that they are very happy working and doing businesses and have got good social status in the family. They are able to make decisions now and can take care of their expenses to a certain extent. They no longer bother their husband for small financial needs and are able to take back gifts and goods whenever they visit their mother's houses or relatives.
10. Their economic condition has also become much better. With two people's income in the family, there is no crisis of food and basic needs. However, education is still not a priority.
11. There are few NGOs who came up with innovative ideas and helped these women to do start-up or set their own small businesses. One such NGO is Amrapari (WE CAN).
12. This organization was established in the year 2020 and have a major role in fighting and eradicating patriarchy and poverty in this area. When discussed with the founder, the data received was that she herself belongs to the same marginalized community and hence she was able to foster entrepreneurship for the women living around with a vibrant community of 100 women artisans whom she gave employment in her organization. She is able to provide sustainable livelihood for rural women to earn a stable income and support their families.

Conclusion:

Overall, we can see that with employment and finances, there is increase in social status for women in general as well as women belonging to minority groups. We have seen mostly in the patriarchal societies that women are always subjected to men but those belonging to scheduled tribes, caste or marginalized sections face double oppression. The only way to escape this and earn respect in the family or society is to earn money and be self-dependent. With income from women, men started to help with childcare as well as certain domestic chores so that the women can go out to work without any stress or obligation.

References:

1. Pathan, S. A., & Jha, M. (2022). Miya Muslims of Assam: Identity, Visuality and the Construction of "Doubtful Citizens." *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 42(1), 150–159. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602004.2022.2051947>
2. Das, R., (2014). The Muslims of Assam---A critical Study. IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) Volume 19, Issue 1, Ver. XI, PP 96-100, e-ISSN: 2279-0837, p-ISSN: 2279-0845. www.iosrjournals.org
3. Choudhury, S.. (2019). Miya Poetry: "why it is creating noise in Assam now. India today. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/miya-poetry-why-is-it-creating-noise-in-assam-now-explained-nrc-citizenship-bill-1570048-2019-07-16>
4. Laskar, A.H., Hazari, M. A., (2020). Identity Crisis And The Emergence Of Miya Literature As A Resistance Literature. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 16(2), 1170-1174, ISSN: 1305-578.
5. Duwarah, M., (2024). Muslim women in river islands along the Brahmaputra in Assam: A study on socio-economic, educational and empowerment disparities. *International Research Journal of Humanities and Interdisciplinary Studies*, Vol 5, Issue 6, ISSN: 2582-8568.
6. Bhagawati A.K., "The Char areas of Brahmaputra Valley, Assam: Challenges for Sustainable Development" in *Socio-Economic Life of Char people, Assam* (Gauhati: CAWSSER, 2005)

7. Biswas J., “Economic and Political Empowerment of Women in the Char Areas of Brahmaputra Valley of Assam with special reference to Barpeta District”. (University of North Bengal 2011)
8. Haque D., Hazarika C.,(2020), “An Empirical Analysis of Income and Livelihood Pattern in Sandbar Areas along the River Brahmaputra in Assam”. International Journal of Social Science and Humanity, Vol. 10, No. 2.
9. Hira B., Hazarika P., (2023), “Poverty Dimensions in Char areas of Assam-an Analytical Study”. ResearchGate.
10. Masud T., (2020), “Sketching the Khilonjia Musalman: Identity, Culture and Politics in the Assamese Muslim Community”. Global Media Journal-Indian Edition; Volume 13 Issue1; June 2021.ISSN:2249-5835.
11. Devi L., (2017), “Socio-Economic Development of Muslim Women: Impact of Education”. Indian Journal of Public Administration, Sage Publication, Volume 60, Issue 3.
12. Hasan Z., Menon R. (2006), “Unequal Citizens, A Study of Muslim Women in India”. Oxford India paperbacks.
13. Sachar Committee Report, Prime Minister's High-Level Committee, (Government of India) (2006). Social, Economic and Educational Status of the Muslim Community in India. New Delhi: Cabinet Secretariat, Government of India.
14. 2011- Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, “2023- Report of the Technical Group on Population Projections, Page 86”, 30th April, 2024.