

Insights on Implementation of Public Policy Through Gender Lens: A Study in Context to Assam

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ABSTRACT:

Gender issue becomes a matter of concern for sustainable and inclusive development of India, particularly in Assam where women face multifaceted challenges rooted in socio-cultural, economic and educational disparities. Despite gradual progress, issue such as gender-based violence, limited access to education and healthcare low political participation and economic marginalization continue to hinder women's advancement. Public policy has emerged as a powerful tool in addressing these challenges. So, this paper tries to highlight the factors hindering in the process of the development of women in Assam, assess the role of public policy undertaken by the government of Assam in mitigating these barriers to achieve more towards development and proposes recommendations for enhancing empowerment by reducing inequalities across the state .

KEYWORDS: Gender, Public policy, Issues of women, Women empowerment Recommendations.

INTRODUCTION:

Assam ,a state of north-eastern region of India is known for richness in natural resources, historical background and cultural heritage .It is a homeland for many indigenous tribal communities and non-tribal communities. Agriculture becomes the primary source of income for almost all the families so most of the women in Assam play crucial roles in agriculture , weaving and informal sectors but their contributions often remain devalued and underrepresented in policy making processes, economic sectors ,etc. Gender inequality in Assam has been perpetuated by traditional norms, limited access to education ,health care and unequal economic opportunities for women. So, implementation of public policy through a gender lens has become an essential approach in shaping socio-economic status of women ensuring equitable development and inclusive governance

However, Government of Assam has launched various policies targeting to dismantle structural barriers and promote women's empowerment across all sectors -education, health, economic participation ,political representation and access to justice. Policies like Assam State Policy for women such as - Mukhya-Mantri Nijut Moina Scheme, Swanirbhar Nari -Amanirbhar scheme ,Orunodoi Scheme , Self -helps groups under NRLM ,Shakti Sadan Scheme,Ujjawala etc .have provided various impacts on women in Assam and enhancing the level of empowerment .

This paper thus aims to identify the challenges that hinder the full realization of gender equity in the sta-

te and how the public policy undertaken by the government impacts in addressing gender inequality and empowering women.

OBJECTIVE

1. To identify the factors hindering in the process of development of women in Assam.
2. To analyse the public policy undertaken by the Government of Assam on empowering women.
3. To assess the impact of public policy on women and provide recommendations.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Choudhury and Kalita (2018) observed that while public policy frameworks exist, **implementation in Assam is uneven** due to geographical isolation, poor monitoring mechanisms, and bureaucratic inefficiencies. Language diversity and the state's socio-political instability also pose challenges in delivering benefits to women, especially among ethnic minorities and marginalized groups

Baruah (2020) noted that although women's SHGs have grown in number, access to sustainable livelihoods remains limited by factors such as lack of market access, digital literacy, and patriarchal resistance within households.

Gogoi (2021) reported that while primary school enrollment of girls in Assam has improved, dropout rates remain high in tribal and char (riverine) areas due to early marriage, domestic responsibilities, and lack of sanitation in schools.

Baruah(2022)examined the implementation of gender sensitive policies in Assam's urban areas and found that policy impact is stronger in urban centers ,with rural lagging due to administrative inefficiencies and lack of policy outreach.

Various studies have been made related to the topic and it is found that there are number of studies on impact of policies on women at national level,but limited studies found in context to Assam. Moreover ,many studies overlooked the schemes for digital empowerment of women .So this paper tries to study on all the policies impacting on the empowerment of women at all levels.

METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

The study is basically an exploratory and explanatory one and mixed methods(qualitative and quantitative approach)are used to study the impacts of public policy on women empowerment in every aspects. Quantitative methods are used to understand the percentage of women facing gender inequalities and violence in various fields by using secondary data such as government reports, census ,news report, websites etc. On the other hand ,Qualitative methods are used to understand the level of empowerment by using secondary data sources like government reports, census,etc.

DISCUSSION:

Gender: A Brief Overview:-

Gender is not something we are born with, and not something we have, but something we do (West and Zimmerman 1987) – something we perform (Butler 1990).¹Gender is socially constructed, and this process begins soon after a child is born. Social institutions such as the family, society, and various

¹From Eckert, Penelope and McConnellGinet, Sally. Language and Gend Second Edition. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press

socio-cultural practices shape differences based on the child's sex. These differences are reflected in areas such as clothing, behaviour, social roles, status, identity, and responsibilities. Through these everyday practices and expectations, gender is gradually formed and reinforced within society.² Gender, we said, was an achieved status: that which is constructed through psychological, cultural, and social means.

PUBLIC POLICY: AN OVERVIEW:

Public administration emerged as a tool of the state to promote the public interest, distinguishing it from the pursuit of private interests. The term public refers to the collective interests of society as a whole, rather than the personal concerns of individuals or select groups. In the realm of politics, the government serves as the primary institution responsible for addressing the needs and expectations of the public.

The term policy generally denotes a structured plan or program of action aimed at achieving a specific goal. Robert Presthus describes policy as a decision made by an individual or group that clarifies, justifies, and directs a particular course of action. Therefore, policy can be broadly defined as a deliberate plan or strategy—whether by an individual, a group, an institution, or a government—designed to accomplish a specific objective within a certain context.

Public policy, as a framework for understanding political change, has been defined in various ways depending on the issue at hand. Thomas R. Dye defines public policy as "whatever governments choose to do or not to do," encompassing both actions and inactions by the government. B. Guy Peters views public policy as the "sum of government activities, whether undertaken directly or through agents, that impact citizens' lives."

According to James E. Anderson, public policy is "a purposive course of action followed by an actor or set of actors in dealing with a problem or matter of concern." This definition emphasizes what is actually implemented, rather than what is merely intended or proposed. It also distinguishes policy from a decision, the latter being a selection among alternatives.

Public policy is distinct in that it is created by what David Easton refers to as the authorities in a political system—such as elders, chiefs, executives, legislators, judges, and administrators. While non-governmental actors can influence the development of public policy, its formal creation and implementation lie primarily in the hands of governmental institutions and officials.

NATURE AND TYPES

Public policy is formulated and implemented in various forms; general, specific, broad, narrow, simplex, complex, positive, negative, written, unwritten etc.

From a public policy perspective, government activities can be broadly classified into three categories. First, those linked to specific policies; second, those of a general nature; and third, those based on vague or inconsistent policies.

However, **Thomas Lowi** (1964) identified four primary types of public policy: **Distributive, Redistributive, Regulatory, and Constituent.**

Distributive Policy: This policy type is centered on the allocation of resources or services to various segments of society, typically to provide broad public benefits. Common examples include funding for public infrastructure projects, educational institutions, or agricultural subsidies.

²Understanding Gender and other related concepts, IGNOU, The people's University.

Redistributive Policy: These policies are designed to shift resources within society, often to reduce economic or social disparities. Their goal is to promote equity and justice. Examples include progressive taxation, welfare programs like Social Security, and initiatives aimed at affordable housing.

Regulatory Policy: This category involves creating rules or standards intended to guide or restrict behavior, usually to protect public interests or oversee industry practices. Examples include environmental protection laws, financial regulations, and consumer safety standards.

Constituent Policy: These policies define the foundational framework of government operations and structure. They often deal with constitutional matters or the establishment of governmental institutions. Examples include creating a judiciary, determining voting rights, and outlining the powers of different governmental branches.

ISSUES AND CONDITIONS FACED BY WOMEN IN ASSAM:-

Although women make up half the global population, their voices and contributions are often undervalued. In India, the Constitution strongly advocates for gender equality through its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, and Directive Principles. Yet, discrimination against women persists across the country. The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2022 highlights that the world is not on track to achieve gender equality and empowering all women and girls by 2030 recognizes that women's empowerment is essential for a better future for everyone. Globally, women face more barriers than men in economic participation, education, healthcare, safety, and political representation. Ensuring women's rights and enabling them to reach their full potential is vital not only for gender equality but also for broader development outcomes.

In the context of Assamese society, the role of women has evolved over time. In ancient times, practices like purdah and sati were absent, and widow remarriage was socially accepted. However, during the Ahom rule, women's economic independence and mobility declined due to the shift to a settled agricultural system. They were sometimes sold or forced to get married for political purposes. The Vaishnavite movement also excluded women from key religious spaces. However, during the British period, women's status in Assam began to improve, with Christian missionaries helping a few gain access to education.

So the challenges persist and here are some of the issues hindering in full development of women.

- 1. Economic Issue :-**According to the Economic Survey ,Assam 2009-2010,women constitute 32.50 % of all the organized sector workers which is only 19 % on the all-India level in the same sector. The participation rate is 31.5%, also surpassing the national average. Urban women benefit from better access to education and employment opportunities, though challenges like wage disparity persist. In Assam, women required to spend time on domestic duties are higher in urban areas (23.65 percent) than in rural areas (18 percent).
- 2. Educational Access:-**Education is a key factor in empowerment, but rural women in Assam face several obstacles in accessing it. The female literacy rate in Assam is 67.27%, as per 2011 census lower than the male literacy rate . Many rural schools lack proper infrastructure. Additionally, social restrictions on girls' education and poverty force many young girls to drop out early, limiting their future opportunities. Among the women of age 5 years and older, 38.35 percent are currently enrolled, 51.12 percent are ever enrolled but currently not enrolled, and 11 percent are never enrolled in Assam.

3. **Health Issue:** Assam's maternal mortality ratio has improved from 195 to 167 per 100,000 live births, marking a significant decline. However, still, Assam has recorded the second highest Maternal mortality rate only next to Madhya Pradesh as per sample Registration System Report. The infant mortality rate is 33 per 1,000 live births, with rural areas experiencing higher rates than urban counterparts. In Assam the IMR for urban areas is 16, it is more than double at 36 for rural areas. Only 9% of ever-married women aged 18–49 in Assam make independent decisions about their healthcare, with slightly higher autonomy in urban areas (11%) than rural (8%). Sanitary napkin usage is more common in urban areas (62.64%) than rural (57.33%), while cloth is still used by 23.23% overall—25% in rural and 18.55% in urban areas. Alarming, 15% of women still give birth at home, with much higher rates in districts like West Karbi Anglong (60%), Lakhimpur (51%), Cachar (48%), and Dhemaji (44%).
4. **Gender-based violence:** It is another major concern. Around 36.5% of women in Assam experience physical or sexual violence, which is slightly higher than the national average of 35.4%. The state also reports a higher incidence of sexual violence (9.6%) compared to the national rate (6.7%). Domestic violence remains a significant barrier to women's empowerment. Moreover, there are other barriers too facing by women in recent times are **trafficking, rape, witch-hunting, eve-teasing, acid attacks etc.**
According to the latest National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), Assam tops in the crime rate against women for the fifth consecutive year among all the states in India till 2021. However, there is a fall in the crime rate against women in 2022, and the state has reached the rank of 9th among all states and union territories in India.
5. **Political Representation:-** Although Women hold 33% of seats in Panchayati Raj institutions, yet their contribution in decision-making process are very little in comparison to men. Moreover, Representation in state and national legislatures is also limited, with women constituting a small percentage of elected representatives.
6. **Socio-cultural Barriers:-** Women in Assam face several socio-cultural barriers rooted in patriarchy, traditional norms, and economic challenges. Mainly, patriarchal society limits women's decision-making power and enforces traditional gender roles. Moreover, due to ethnic diversity prevails in Assam, many conflicts and insurgency have been occurred over time and it greatly provides impact on the life of women. Further more, cultural restrictions imposing on women have limited their freedom and mobility in certain areas.

PUBLIC POLICY AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT:

In India, women are among the most vulnerable groups due to the deeply rooted patriarchal structure of society, leading to widespread gender disparities. While women are sometimes revered, they are also often subjected to oppression. Although gender inequality exists globally, it is more pronounced in developing countries. To address this, the Indian government introduced the Gender Responsive Budget (GRB), which is not a separate budget for women but a tool to promote gender equality by ensuring women's needs are considered in the development process. In India, Gender Budgeting was first introduced in the year 2005-06 to address the massive inequality existing in the Indian society and now it is existed in every parts of India. In Assam, gender budget was introduced in 2012 and since 2016-17, the government of Assam has formulated and implemented various policies and schemes for reducing gender inequality and enhancing the level of empowerment in all aspects.

INITIATIVES AND POLICIES TAKEN BY THE GOVERNMENT OF ASSAM FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT ..

1. Policies for Educational Empowerment

The Government of Assam has taken significant steps to promote girls' education, particularly in rural areas where access to education is limited.

Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan aimed at increasing female literacy and enrollment in education.

- **Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV)** Residential schools for girls from SC, ST, OBC, and minority communities. It is located in educationally backward blocks of Assam.
- **Pre-Matric and Post-Matric Scholarships** -Special scholarships are given to the girl students belonging to Tea tribes, Tribal communities and Economically backward families
- **Pragyan Bharati Scooty Scheme**:- Recognizing the challenges faced by young women in pursuing higher studies, the government fulfilled its electoral promise by **distributing scooters** to female students who excelled in their higher secondary examinations. In 2025, government of Assam distributed scooty more than 35,000 students including both boys and girls securing good marks in HS exam. This practical initiative aims to ease their daily commute and encourage higher educational attainment.
- In a prior move, the government also provided **free bicycles** to girls from Below Poverty Line (BPL) families, serving as an incentive to keep them in school and reduce dropout rates. These schemes reflect a strong commitment to enhancing the educational opportunities available to young girls across the state.
- **Sanitary pads and napkins** are also distributed to the girl child through government schools and anganwadi centers to promote **menstrual hygiene** and reduce dropout rates among adolescent girls.
- **Beti Bachao ,Beti Padhao scheme** has been implemented following the pattern of central government which aims to prevent female foeticide, promote girl child education and Increase awareness on gender equality.
- **Nijut Moina Achoni** has recently been implemented in Assam for increasing enrollment rates and preventing dropout rates of girls in higher education and mainly to combat the social evil of child marriage.

Policies for Economic Empowerment

To improve the financial security of girls and their families, Assam has aligned with national programs like the **Sukanya Samridhi Yojana**, which allows for long-term savings in the name of a girl child. Under this scheme, the account remains active until the girl turns 21, with partial withdrawals permitted at age 18 for educational expenses. This initiative is designed to reduce financial barriers to education and delay early marriages by ensuring economic preparedness.

In addition, the state introduced the "**Arundhati Swarna Yojana**," which promises 10 grams of gold to brides from economically weaker sections (with annual family income below ₹5 lakhs) upon their first legally registered marriage. The initiative aims to offer financial support to newlywed women while also reinforcing the importance of legal marriage practices.

- **-Orunodoi Scheme is a Flagship welfare scheme** that provides ₹1,250 per month to women of low-income households. It focuses on health, nutrition, education, and economic security. **Women are designated as the direct beneficiaries** to promote their role in family decision-making.

- **Assam State Rural Livelihood Mission (ASRLM)** promotes **Self-Help Groups (SHGs)** for women in rural areas. It enables women to form groups ,save collectively and access credit to start or expand income generating activities .Provide Skill training and promote financial inclusion ,social empowerment and sustainable livelihoods for women.
- **Swami Vivekananda Assam Youth Empowerment (SVAYEM)** aimed at youth including young women entrepreneurs .Offers financial support for starting small businesses (₹50,000–₹2 lakh).Includes capacity building and skill development.

3. Policies for Political Empowerment:-

- **Reservation** -33% Reservation in Panchayati Raj Institutions.**Ensures one-third of seats in village, block, and district-level Panchayats are reserved for women.Encourages participation of women in grassroots governance.**
- **Capacity Building Programs for Elected Women Representatives**-Conducted by State Institute of Panchayat and Rural Development (SIPRD).it provides training on: Panchayati Raj functions. , Budgeting and governance .and Leadership and public speaking.
- **Women in Urban Governance**-Though not constitutionally mandated like Panchayats, women are actively encouraged to contest in municipal elections. The government promotes women's representation in Town Committees and Municipal Boards.
- **Political Awareness Campaigns**-Conducted by the Women and Child Development Department to motivate women to vote, contest elections, and take part in public life.

4. Policies for Social Empowerment

Historically, Assamese society has not embraced female infanticide, even though the birth of a girl was often seen as burdensome. However, shifts in social attitudes are now supported by government schemes aiming to celebrate and support girl children. For instance, under the **National Health Mission**, programs like the **Mamoni Scheme** provide financial assistance to pregnant women, while **Majoni** grants ₹5000 on the birth of a girl child in families with two children. These schemes are changing societal perceptions by attributing economic and symbolic value to the birth and well-being of girl child. **Assam State Commission for Women**-A statutory body that: Investigates complaints related to women's rights violations. Conducts public awareness programs on gender issues Advises the government on legal and policy reforms.

Moreover, Government Of Assam has provided funds through providing cheques to the members of **Self help Groups (SHGs)** to empower women to involve in various activities like rearing cattle, starting small business etc..

5. Policies for Digital Empowerment

The Government has undertaken various initiatives to empower women and girls through educational, social, economic, and political upliftment. Special focus has been given to enhancing digital literacy, enabling women and girls to use digital devices for education, business, and digital transactions.

One key initiative is the **Pradhan Mantri Gramin Digital Saksharta Abhiyan (PMGDISHA)** under the Digital India programme, aiming to bridge the digital divide in rural areas by covering 6 crore households. As of 08.12.2022, women constitute over 53% of total enrolments, 54% of trained, and 56% of certified beneficiaries.

Previously, Assam had emerged as the leading state in India for digital payments, earning the title of the best Digipay Sakhi State for August 2024. This recognition follows a significant achievement in which the state recorded transactions totaling an impressive Rs 20.13 crore.

The **Digipay Sakhi** initiative, launched by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, focuses on training women to become digital payment agents. The state government, led by CM Sarma, has prioritized digital transformation as part of its broader development agenda.

The efforts to enhance digital literacy among women have not only increased the number of transactions but also fostered a sense of financial independence among participants. The women involved in the Digipay Sakhi program have become crucial intermediaries, helping their families and communities adapt to the digital economy.

The **Ministry of Women and Child Development** has launched **Mission Shakti**, an umbrella scheme for the safety, security, and empowerment of women during the 15th Finance Commission period, focusing on convergence and efficiency in delivering women-centric programs.

'Women Helpline (181) A 24x7 toll-free number to help women in distress .Linked to OSCs, police, legal aid, and hospitals.

IMPACT OF PUBLIC POLICY ON WOMEN:-

The policies that implemented by the government of Assam has brought many positive impacts on the life of women. Although ,all women does not enjoy equally the benefits of the policies due to unawareness, uneducated, geographical barriers etc but it helps a lot in bringing empowerment of women at all levels .

1. Female literacy rate has been increased 56% as per 2001 census to 67.27 % as per 2011 census. However,In 2021, the female literacy rate in India was 91.95% Between 2010-2021, the female literacy rate in India has increased by 14.4%
2. According to National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER)'s estimation for 2023–24,Labour Force Participation Rate(LFPR) is slightly higher in urban areas than in rural areas. Female Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) is 28 percent, as against 73 percent for males in Assam. The unemployment rate is 6.06 percent, 8.71 percent for females and 4.95 percent for males.
3. Assam's crime rate has been dropped from 349 per lakh population in 2020 to 139 in 2024.
4. Only about 9 percent of the ever-married women of age 18 to 49 take their own decisions about health care, which is higher in urban areas (11 percent) as compared to rural areas (8 percent).Use of Sanitary napkins are more used by women in urban areas than rural areas.
5. Transaction value of Rs. 29.06 crore and 1.43 lakh transactions, the state showcases the growing impact of digital inclusion and women-led financial services. However, Digital literacy is seen more among the women in urban areas than in rural areas.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite having undertaken so many policies by the Assam Government ,still challenges have been faced by women in order to get due rights and privileges. Therefore, some recommendations are given below.

1. Awareness programme related to health and hygiene should be given periodically more in the rural and tribal areas of women.
2. Creating more job opportunities ,financial literacy and promoting entrepreneurship among women will enhance their financial independence and contribute significantly to their overall empowerment.
3. Safety and Preventive measures should be taken through complement helplines and One Stop Centres (OSCs) with preventive education in schools, workplaces, and community spaces; ensure rapid response mechanisms are well-resourced and accessible.Strengthening strict legal protections

for women for reducing the number of crime rate against women and ensuring their safety, dignity, and overall well-being.

4. The government should prioritize more in establishing cottage industries in Assam, especially for empowering rural women.
5. More training on digital literacy should be given to the women in rural areas. Moreover, steps to be taken to tailor for low-literacy beneficiaries, plus simplified documentation pathways for the poorest and marginalized.

CONCLUSION:

The impact of public policy on women is profound and far-reaching, shaping their access to education, healthcare, employment, safety, and political participation. Well-designed and inclusive policies can promote gender equality, empower women economically and socially, and break cycles of discrimination and marginalization. Conversely, policies that ignore or inadequately address the unique challenges faced by women risk reinforcing existing inequalities. As societies continue to evolve, it is crucial that public policy is informed by gender-sensitive analysis and guided by the principles of equity, representation, and justice. Only then can we ensure that women are not just beneficiaries of development, but also active agents in shaping a more inclusive and equitable future.

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