

# **Gender Discrimination in Assam: A Reality Check**

by

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There is a consensus that women of Assam in general (alongside women of NE India) enjoy greater freedom when compared to their all-India counterparts. Historically, Assam is a society free from dowry and *Sati*. There is nevertheless evidence that there are gender-related discriminations within the society. Our analysis here is based on four indicators: Literacy/Education, Employment, Violence against Women (VAW) and Trafficking.

According to the Census of India 2011, Assam's population is 31.1 million consisting of 15.9 million males and 15.2 million females with a revealed sex ratio is 954 females per 1000 males. With respect to the literacy rates, some positive aspects are apparent—that 73.18% (78.81% male and 67.27% female) of its population are literates, which is slightly below the national average of 74.04%, but increased from 63.25% in 2001 (54.61% females and 71.28% males were literates). While the state can pride itself in making a steady progress in literacy, the schools of Assam continue to face challenges with higher rates of dropouts among the girls, primarily due to lack of access to toilets and the responsibilities entailed on a girl child to care for her younger siblings. The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) audit unravels that despite the right to education among the children aged 6-14 years, 13,616 schools (33.26%) operate on temporary structures. 3,557 (8.69%) schools have no access to drinking water facilities, while 16,449 (40.18%) schools have no girl's toilet; a staggering 37,086 (90.60%) schools fails to access electricity supply and 7474 (18.26%) lower primary schools have only one teacher responsible for teaching five classes in one single room. Interestingly but unsurprisingly, with respect to higher education in the state, as unfolded by the All India Survey on Higher Education, 2011-2012, Ministry of Human Resource Development, the number of females (262,602) enrolled in different higher educational programmes slightly surpasses their male counterparts (258,794). However, the total number of scheduled caste (SC) and scheduled tribe (ST) females enrolled in the same are respectively 15,381 and 30,762, which is slightly lower when compared to the males belonging to SC (16,592) and ST (31,270). These observations signal that mainly the elite middle and lower middle classes have been making significant in-roads within the realm of higher education. Alongside, it also indicates that male/female access to higher education is almost at par within the state testifying that Gender Parity Index (GPI) is 0.98, whereas the all-India GPI stands at 0.88. Nonetheless, Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in Higher education for Assam for the age group 18-23 is 14.4 (Females: 14.2, Males: 14.5) against the all-India GER of 20.4 (Females: 18.9, Males:

21.6). These are merely numbers however. Ethnographic observation unveils society's positive attitude towards accessing higher education, with more and more parents (from the middle and lower middle classes) investing on their children's education with their well-intended aspiration that a well-paid job of their children would pay good returns on the investment. Despite positive direction towards higher education especially in terms of establishment of government and private funded universities and intuitions, such as Tezpur University, Assam University, IIT, Tata Institute of Social Science, Don Bosco University and Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva Viswavidyalaya and several medical institutions, incongruity persists— in most colleges of Assam, the system remains plagued by obsolete curricula and poorly-equipped libraries, and beset with decrepit infrastructure. It remains paramount therefore to ensure quality and efficiency in higher education.

Turning on to participation in the economy, among the 35 states and union territories of India, Assam ranks 21 with respect to Female Work Participation Rate (FWPR). FWPR in Assam merely increased from 20.7% in 2001 to 22.46% (23.7% in rural areas and 14.9% in the urban areas) in 2014. Nationally, FWPR stands at 25.51% (30% in urban areas and 15.4% in rural areas). Himachal Pradesh ranks first with 44.82% and among the NE states, in Nagaland, FWPR is 44.74% followed by 38.56% in Manipur, while in Mizoram FWPR is 36.16%; it is 35.44% in Arunachal Pradesh, 32.67% in Meghalaya and 23.57% in Tripura. These statistics divulges that state's FWPR continues to be lamentably poor within the country. Disgracefully, the overall unemployment looms large—while in India, one out of every three graduates is unemployed, unemployment figures for *Assam stands at 38% connoting that 15% youth of rural Assam are unemployed*. It is bewildering that Kerala with highest literacy rates (93.91) also suffer from highest youth unemployment rates especially in rural Kerala, which is 21.7%.

These dismal figures herald a perturbing concern with ominous ramifications. Indeed, burgeoning unemployment alongside multi-dimensional poverty, recurring floods and perennial insurgency, ethnic conflicts, large-scale illegal migration paves the way to varied forms of VAW (including trafficking). Disturbing as it is, Assam is the topmost crime prone State for crimes against women in India, recording 19,139 reported incidents of VAW. Wistfully, despite of its varied political instability, the State was known for its relatively polite public culture, especially while dealing with women. However, during 2005-2014, the state registered 68,329 cases of VAW claiming 1,589 lives linked to rape (78), dowry (1,388) and witch-hunting (123). Another sinister

dimension facing the state is the growing trend of human (child) trafficking—in India, a child goes missing every 30 seconds. Children especially girls and young women are kidnapped/lured by false promises of better lives by the traffickers and sold into affluent households, brothels and marriages and as bonded labours for fixed prices. While trafficking for sexual exploitation bears a long history, trafficking for domestic labour is a recent trend. Between 2007- June 2014, approximately 9500 children were trafficked from Assam, of which only 3800 have been rescued from different parts of India. Arguably, these perturbing images signal that the perception that women of Assam enjoy greater freedom is actually a myth in reality.

In August 2015, Assam Assembly passed the Assam Witch Hunting (Prohibition, Prevention and Protection) Bill, 2015 making the offence cognizable, non-bailable and non-compoundable under the Act. Seemingly, the Central Government has taken stringent measures to tackle incidents related to VAW and organised crimes linked to trafficking through implementation of many acts including the Criminal Law Amendment Act, 2013. However, a legal recourse is sought only after a crime has been committed. Everyday protection of the society should emerge from within the society. Hence, urgency remains at tackling multi-dimensional poverty. At the same time, coordinated strategies ensuring requisite intervention are espoused to tackle VAW and trafficking. It will be a socially optimal policy to invest in proper education and furnishing full information to the rural folk about the dangers of sending their girls to the metropolis for employment.

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