

BODO WOMEN IN WORK FORCE IN BODOLAND

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It is well known fact that women occupy low status in society through a historical process of discrimination. There are several ways in which women are denied equal opportunities and one of the ways through denying girls their rightful access to education¹. In this chapter, an attempt is made to understand the nature of work that the Bodo women do and how it is valued. It is hoped that this understanding will help to place a high priority to the education of girls so that women's work does not continued to be devalued.

The contribution of Bodo women to household and community work as well as to the economy of the family and the society is very crucial and significant. However, policy makers and the male dominated society have consistently ignored this contribution over the years. "One important indicator of the economic growth of any country is the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The GDP is the total output of goods and services for final use produced by an economy by both residents and non-residents. This output Goods (agricultural, manufacturing and cottage) and services (financial and insurance) is expressed in monetary terms. This figure is a good indicator about the state of any economy. However, since women's work is devalued, their contribution to the national economy and to the GDP has been consistently ignored and still does not find a place in the computing of national accounts in many countries.²

Women, a weaker and oppressed section, are important segment of the Indian society. Although, the neglect and discrimination of women is hardly exist in the Bodo society but it is very common to other Indian society in different parts of states³. Still than, Bodo women's belongs to the vulnerable part of the society as she sleeps last and rises first. She feeds her family first and eats. She is the last to receive education and first to drop out of it. She is the last to get a proper job and the first to be laid off during 'structural adjustment'. She is the last to be consulted for decisions about her environment and the first to be affected.

As per India society is concerned male superiority and female inferiority is more or less accepted norms. It is belief that women are physically weak, intellectually poor, mentally inconsistent, timid and irrational and psychologically unstable⁴. In the traditional Bodo society it is considered that a woman cannot exist without the protection and supervision of a man who is supposed to be physically strong, assertive, intelligent and calculative. Hence, it is often felt that marriage is the only option open to women. Within the marriage framework, the husband and his family control all outside relationships. Women are dependent on the goodwill of their husbands and most often they have no independent financial standing. But the fact is

that, 'Women are the main providers for one-third of all families in the world and two thirds of the poorest. Three-fourths of the world's micro-entrepreneurs are women and in low income countries, women produce between sixty and eighty percent of the food for local consumption'.⁵

According to Anthropologists and some historians, women were the major producers of food, textile and handicrafts throughout human history and continue to provide a major labour input where production is still in small scale subsistence sector. Most of the women's work is either not visible or is only partially accounted for in the data on workforce participation. The component of women's work includes housework, paid and unpaid work related to home based craft activities, family enterprise or business and paid work outside home. The kind of work women attend is determined by women's position in the society and family's location in the social hierarchy. Women's work also differ according to age, gender, income, occupational group, location (rural/urban), size and structure of the family.⁶ As women work's is mostly for self consumption, much of the work that they do is not recognised as 'work' in the national income statistics. In the Bodo society Bodo women's are engaged in cooking, housekeeping, child care, fetching fuel wood and water, collection of forest produce, care of livestock, house repair and maintenance, storing grains, preparation and preservation of foods etc. Much of the work which is important for the maintenance of families is largely done by women in the Bodo society.⁷

To understand the nature and extent of Bodo women's work, it is important to make the distinction between the *productive work* (wage works) and *reproductive work* (the child-bearing and household works) that a women do and the value that is assigned to each of these. It is observe that in ancient pre-historic societies the barter system was the norms, transactions took place on the basis of exchange value. But modernisation has led to a market economy in which cash transactions have assumed paramount importance and non-cash transactions have been devalued."⁸ Therefore in present world, grater value is given to *productive work* and if any product or service does have cash value then it is valueless. Much of the work that women do is unpaid i.e. the *reproductive works* as mention above activities like that of childbearing and rearing, cleaning, washing, cooking, fetching water, collection of fire wood, collection of vegetables and fruits from forest, caring children, agriculture, feeding animals, handicrafts, preparation of rice beer etc. The work of Bodo women is sustaining and maintaining the human race is completely ignored and rendered valueless by the society.⁹

The devaluing of women's reproductive works has a bearing on the productive work that women do as the Dr. Mayo story above shows. Let us try to understand how much women's productive labour is also devalued. A patriarchal society has not only identified the mode of behaviour that men and woman must conform by but has defined women's work roles as well. Similarly, in the handloom and weaving industry, women do all the work related to preparing yarn, while men are in charge of the actual weaving. This phenomenon, which has been defined by scholars as the gender division of labour, restricts and confines men and women within specific work roles and more importantly, ascribes grater value to the work that men do. It completely negates the fact that women work for longer hours since they bear the burden of both productive and reproductive work. Gender division of labour results in great wage differentials between men

and women which, regrettable the law and policy makers have done little to change. The role that women play in reproductive work and in the subsistence economy frees men not only to acquire and upgrade them to participate in productive work.

The constitutional provision today makes it clear that women have equal rights with them in all spheres of life. The age old suppression of women by men has been put to an end at least constitutionally. Women are free like men to choose any form of education and training to equip them for a career. The constitution not only gives equality in education to women but it also assures equal opportunity to women in matters of public appointments. It says, “there shall be equality of opportunity for all citizens in matters relating to employment and appointment to any office under the state and no citizen shall, on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth, residence or any of these be ineligible for or discriminated against in respect of any employment or office under the state”. Plans and programmes should be formulated not merely to educate women for new responsibilities and provide them with opportunities for employment in public life but also to promote an entirely new set of attitudes and values concerning the role and status of women.¹¹

Present Indian society is a society dominated by values and agenda where women’s labour has been viewed only as subsidiary labour a derivative of male labour. What is even of grater concern is that women’s contributory role in society economy and polity have seldom been acknowledged by policy makers and social thinkers. In fact, since their inception, the social sciences have been dominated by men and as a logical extension have been equally dominated by the assumption of male supremacy as a social constant, a universal fact of psychological and biological life. It was almost forgotten that human being consisted of women too. History was written from the perspective of *mankind*. ‘She’ was sometimes glimpsed in some history text books, that too perhaps because her achievements were considered significant by male standards. Thus, women in history, have by and large remained invisible or have been added in but never be a part of theory construction or the historiography research agenda which has remained ‘rational’, ‘scientific’ and ‘universal’.¹²

In Bodoland, sericulture sector has long been dominated by women where it has remained largely house hold based. In fact, the art of sericulture was known to Bodo women from the age of two epics and if not earlier. *Endi or Muga*, the golden yellow silk is mostly associated with Assam and it is in the weaving of this silk that the Bodo or Assamese women are renowned. “However it was Suaulkuchi, a village located on the northern bank of Brahmaputra that developed into an important silk weaving centre and came to be known as the ‘*Manchester of Assam*’. This industry is completely dominated by women folks from centuries.¹³

Apart from the appreciative references to the Bodo (Assamese) women’s weaving silk, however, there has been little attempt till date to undertake studies in this sector that make women’s role in this sector as their main concern. While the historians of this region mentioned that the Bodo (Assamese) women were skilled weavers, no attempt has been made to understand the women as socially productive workers. This is

because an inherent gender bias exists regarding the concept of labour itself. Feminists feel that in order to understand women in their specific historical conditions, we must examine the kind of work they perform, the way in which labour is organised and the social relations that women form with others and with men as a result of their labour and its mode of organisation.¹⁴

Women are taking up jobs due to various reasons. A few women work as sole supporters of the family while others work as additional bread-winners of the family. Generally women face lots of problems in seeking employment. The Report of National Committee on the Status of Women (1975)¹⁵, pointed out that the statutory provisions of maternity benefits and welfare facilities like crèches and separate sanitary conveniences constituted a negligible expenditure to the establishments. Similarly the private establishments by and large have stopped recruiting women as they argue that when there is a choice between an equally competent man and woman, why not they should prefer a man who could not need maternity leave and would not present his employees with the above said problem.¹⁶

Studies have shown that many cities, a number of industrial organisations do advertise for the post or posts exclusively meant for male applicants. Studies have also shown that when women apply for traditionally male jobs, they tend to get rejected at the initial stage of selection by screening and short listing of job applications. In case they are called for an interview either by mistake or otherwise, they in general tend to get lower evaluation in the selection process.¹⁷

In spite of these factors women are compelled to seek employment due to many reasons. The Ministry of Labour, Government of India has pointed out that whatsoever is the stage of economic or social development of a country, four factors prevail which led women to join the work force. They are: Inadequate income of the principal earner which forces women to work and supplement the income; mishaps such as incapacity of the bread – winner, death of the bread winner and a woman's desire for economic independence or for securing a higher standard of living.¹⁸ There is also a desire on the part of the women to give expression to her talents and skills. Some other studies have brought to light the fact that loneliness is a powerful motive for women to seek employment outside their homes.

In BTC (Bodoland Territorial Council) also their importance as a work force has been either neglected or misrepresented. Many activities of Bodo women in economically gainful work are either given no recognition or not properly represented in the statistical data traditional perception of male-female relationship. Even if they get employment after undergoing all the hurdles, they are made to abide by the traditional perception of male-female relationship. They find it difficult to interact as they have been trained to listen, obey and leave decision making to men in the family or in the business situation. It is also felt that they pose special problems to their employers because of their high absenteeism and turn over by rejecting promotions and resisting transfers etc.

In order to evaluate the value of Home Work, two methods of approach can be applied. The first method is the '*Opportunity Cost Approach*', which sets the value of work done at home equal to the income the person could earn in the labour market. The second one is the '*Market Cost Approach*', which uses the

cost of hiring some one to do the house work to determine its value. Women, who has been raised to consider a career unacceptable for a good wife and mother, she may chose to forgo high salary to be full time home maker. This doesn't necessarily mean that her work at home is worth as much as her work in the market would be.¹⁹ The value of house work done by the Bodo women cannot be exactly determined and cannot be accurately measured. As there is no time limit in the case of house work, so almost one-third of the day, women engaged them in the family for the development and welfare of the family members. Bodo women help in running the family in a planed and systematic way. In the Bodo family either rich or poor, without women, a family cannot be a complete family. So the importance of women in the family cannot be underestimated whether she is literate or illiterate.

We often observe in the labour market the value of per hour can be identified through their salary or wages simply but does not the society try to identify the value of work per hour at home. Because, in case of home; no money is paid per hour. So in our eyes they are doing only their duties. It is exception in the case of self employed women who are doing different types works sitting at home and they are getting their remuneration. The labour of Bodo women in the houses certainly enables men to produce more wealth than otherwise could and in this way women are economic factors in the society. Women could become emancipated through participation in the labour market and we can put forward some arguments against the relation of the traditional family institution because of the way in which it exploited women. Women's work should be supported or respected as it is always an important standard of measure of women's status, specially when their labour is remunerated with wage and also, the presence of women in the paid labour force reflect the level of society's development.²⁰

In Bodo society, the participation of women in the labour force not only desirable but also essential because it increase the level of food availability, nutrition, productivity and creates essential demands. Women's participation in the labour market also determines the structure of the household and the relationship within the family. It also results in the reduction in female fertility and improvement in the quality of lives. Thus, we can undoubtedly say that women's participation in labour force seems to lead to multidimensional utilities relating to personal, economic, social health and welfare sectors. The historical tracing of women's status has revealed that they had higher status in horticultural societies than in agricultural and industrial societies. With industrialization much productive activities were shifted from home to the factories and to the office.²¹

In rural and backward areas of Bodoland BTC) majority of Bodo women's are illiterate and women work forces were involved in agricultural and other unskilled activities. This is also true that in case of urban and developed areas, where the majority of women are engaged in unskilled labour, mostly involved in menial labour services and hence remain unskilled throughout their work lives. Increased work-participation of women is considered as one of the remedies to elevate their position in the society. The work participation rate decreases as the educational level at secondary level of educational registers a sudden upward trend to graduation level and above. Inequality exists today because one gender has only one kind of responsibility and the other, another kind. Education still is considered as a major mechanism

which can be used to transform social and economic status specially that of women, who because of social sanctions are denied access many spheres of work dominated by men.²²

In Bodoland literary rates for both men and women are increasing steadily, still the increase is more for women and thereby narrowing the gap between the sexes. But the unfortunate is that there is no corresponding increase in the participation in work as far as the women are concerned. It is found that the impact of education on market earnings is no greater than on the corresponding value for household work. In our changing society, even when women possess education, even in certain castes, socio-cultural factors also play a major hurdle in respect of women's earnings in labour market.

Due to the influence of education in Bodoland, Bodo women have started to break the shackles and those women who are economically hard pressed, get engaged in remunerative jobs and also those who wish to live a socially useful life and subsist on the family income, seek employment. They have now realised that work gives them better personal status and an independent social standing. Time has come now to recognised the untiring efforts put in by women folk in keeping the home front in better way, keeping in mind not only the present requirement of the home and society but also nurturing the children to grow as worthy citizens of the future world. Although in the Bodo society, families' money generally comes from the male members of the family, the contribution of the women of the family in enabling the men-folk to go outside for earning is significant and treated equal.²³

In recent time women who were till then not in the employment market are exercising the second option of career, thus exchanging an absolute reliance on their spouses' earnings for a more diversified, personally and mutually enriched sharing of earning responsibilities. As for sharing of household responsibilities it cannot be categorically stated that it is always women's responsibility. In most cases of working women, they are the first generation earning members and there is adjustment by family members, though the extent of help and degree of adjustability are not uniform in all cases. The future generation of working women will gain much more supportive influence from the family once the working women concept becomes a *fait accompli*. Society is slow to accept women in the professional arena and it is 'lamented that norms have not changed' because of any changing attitudes of women to work. Much against the general viewpoint is that working outside home disturbs family life and gives rise to neglect of children and family responsibilities. But in most cases the cohesiveness of families and family values has been strengthened according to them. Career women add to domestic income and are more self confident than entirely domesticated women. Women with only domestic responsibilities, cannot add to income or bring the 'know how' of modern socio-economic institutional conditions outside the home.²⁴

Despite the spread of literacy and modernisation, all the women do not want to work. Mostly they depend on their individuality and family considerations get priority over a career. Personal aspirations, social conventions and economic circumstances appear to be and often conditioned to be mutually inter-dependent. A balancing of options of women is shaved by family background and circumstances, age of children, employment opportunities and the overall cultural milieu.

The primary wave of social change of Bodoland is reflected in terms of the rising age of marriage, smaller families, urbanisation, migration, rising costs and standard of living. These act as very effective socio-economic factors, pushing women into the economic mainstream and changing and also extending their roles and responsibilities. The secondary wave of social change activities emerges from the increase in the proportion of women in the labour force, and because of such a wave, new social welfare services are called forth to deal with the management of home and children.²⁵

In India, women constitute 48.2% (33 crore out of 68.4 crore) of the total population, according to 1981 census. But the percentage of women in the total labour is only 20.8%, whereas in developed countries it ranges from 30 % to 45%. The work participation rate for females increased from 15.9% in 1971 to 23.09% in 1981 in the rural areas of the country thereby showing increasing participation of women in economic activities during the decade of 1971-1981. Roughly every fifth women is a worker as against every second man. The primary sector (farming, livestock, forestry, plantation, orchards etc.) provides work for about 83% of women and 46% of them work as agricultural labourers; 33% are cultivators.²⁶

Agriculture remains the major economic activities of the Bodo women in BTC as well as women's of other parts of the country. According to census of 1971, 80.1% of women workers are found in agriculture. In rural areas they constitute 87% of the female work force. Next to agriculture, because of their labour intensive character, handlooms, handicrafts and rural industries play a vital role in providing work opportunities for women. The low literacy percentage (1981) of women at 22.88% as compared to 47% among men also contributes to the limited employment opportunities of the former. Lack of technical knowledge and skill limit their participation to 16% in the tertiary sector (such as construction, trade and commerce, transportation and storage communication and other services). The participation rate of women in Khadi and village industries is around 45%. Their participation is significant especially in spinning of cotton, wool and silk, manufacturing of fancy and utility articles in fibre industry, cottage industries, processing of cereals and pulses, etc.²⁷

In Bodoland, rural sector is dominant with 90% of its population living in 3,000 villages. Out of total workers 77% are engaged in agriculture and its allied activities. Female population is a significant force in Bodoland. The long term trend in the economic activities of females in rural areas of Bodoland indicates that females continue to concentrate the primary sectors. The number of women workers is higher in agriculture than in the others sectors of industry. In plantation and allied activities females work in the same capacity as that of males. The increase in the number of workers in agriculture as compared to non-agriculture is more marked in the case of females than that of male workers.

It is evident that Bodo women are losing their occupational participation in cottage industry and agriculture. One reason is that in the post independence period, there has been rapid growth in the modern and organised sector of the industry. The role of household industry declined rapidly. The household industry provided the biggest source of self employment to women and was the greatest victims of the

process of economic transformation. They had to face competition from the factory production. In such circumstances, it is necessary to train women for handling new technologies; demonstration cum training centres should be established in urban as well as rural areas to enable women entrepreneurs to learn simple technologies of their interest. This would not only promote self employment among women, but would also generate employment opportunities for the entire female workforce who have been displaced in traditional agricultural employment due to mechanisation and improved economy.

In Bodoland, for rural Bodo women, therefore, new initiatives are particularly urgent in matters of agricultural production, cottage and small scale industry, credit, marketing, energy, technology, potable water supply, sanitation, non-agricultural occupations have assumed greater importance in acting as the main source of income. Moreover, rural women face problems in engaging in income generating activities because of their illiteracy or lack of modern education and training. In addition to this, their time consuming responsibilities within the household requiring like the preparation of food, fetching of fuel and water, caring for animals, rearing of child, house keeping, etc. marginalised them even further from access to education and training.²⁸

Unfortunately, rural development still continues to be largely discussed in terms of agricultural development only. But it is obvious that rural industrial development equally deserves increased attention as being an important source of employment and income. Rural industries if promoted, could supply goods suitable to local market conditions, utilising locally available raw materials and skills. These industries would also provide opportunities to investing surplus rural labour together with satisfying and refining local entrepreneurial initiatives. When such varied activities are established closer to rural areas, rural-urban flow of migration would also increase substantially.²⁹ Thus; economic independence of this nature would accelerate an improvement in the status of Bodo women in Bodoland.

In spite of initiatives taken by the Government of India, the position of Bodo women in labour market is not attractive in Bodoland. Bodo women feel that they can capable to discharge duties assigned to other kinds of jobs that are available. Further, majority of them feel that they are not only capable of doing things properly but also can perform the assigned work as good as men. They are not only confident about the performance and discharge of the assigned duties but they do want to have equal opportunities with men to prove their competence in all possible walks of life, in every profession and in all occupations.

Thus, it has to be recognised that Bodo women today can no longer be regarded as the weaker sex and discriminated as second grade citizens. To improve more their status, proper attention is needed to eradicate illiteracy among Bodo women. It is also equally important to motivate women to work as equal partners of economic development. For assuring equality, dignity, justice, prosperity and stability, the contribution of Bodo women have to be review in a wider perspective in Bodoland and particularly in the Bodo society.

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