
Role of Assamese Women in Politics: Problem and Prospect

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With the advent of increased technologies, speedier communications and the increased desire for economic expansion people all over the world seem to be undergoing notable pressure particularly from economic, political and cultural forces. Assamese women being a part of the whole process cannot be treated separately. In an era of globalization, Assamese women like the other parts of the world, become stronger, stouter and tougher. More women are working, more girls are being educated, women are living longer and having fewer children, there are more females in business. However, the role of Assamese women in politics is not equal with men. Here in this study an attempt has been made to discuss the barriers of women in playing the role of a leader in politics.

Two decades ago, people began using the ‘glass ceiling’ catch phrase to describe organizations failure to promote women into leadership roles. The ‘glass ceiling’ metaphor appears to be a rigid barrier that obstructs career advancement of women, allowing them to see men rising above them in management as well as in politics while watching themselves and other women in their organizations or in political parties unable to achieve the same height. It is an invisible obstacle - one that symbolizes discrimination unforeseen by the victim until the barrier is actually felt, making the journey up the leadership ladder disingenuous. It is an interesting visual as one could also theorize that is not giving the barrier a more impenetrable attribute, such as the former concrete wall, the glass barrier can be broken. It conveys the idea that if a woman should shatter the ceiling, she and others around her might be harmed while advancing through the shards – especially in a society that frets over the disruption of male privilege and traditional sexist cultures. However, it is also a metaphor which communicates that although gender is no longer an absolute barrier symbolized by the concrete wall, it still keeps women away from passage to high-level positions in politics.

In ancient times, Assamese rightful place as a citizen in the mainstream of the society has been ignored. They were often considered incapable for doing anything better for the society. In the early 19th century, the state polity of Assam was restricted only to the members of royal and noble families. And the females were confined to their homes, with multiple invisible inner thresholds regulating their mobility even within it. The situation was more or less the same even in 20th century. The Assam Association, the only socio-political organization of the state could not enlist the Assamese women to play any direct participation in the association. However, the need for active participation of women in politics and other social activities were being felt by a group of women in early 20th century. In 1915 they



formed Dibrugarh Mahila Samity and had started the beginning of formal organization of women in Assam. Women's history is the history of a struggle through various stages, and in Assam the struggle started with the leadership of Chandraprabha Saikiani who was supported by a group of women and liberal men. The women's movements in Assam, like most social movements, were made up of strands that differ on the relative primacy of issues, strategies of mobilization and forms of collective action. Chandraprabha Saikiani, popularly called 'Agni Kanya' was particularly sensitive towards injustice and lack of fairness. In Nowgong Mission School where she studied, she protested against the action of the school authority in not allowing a student to stay in the hostel when she refused to be converted to Christianity. On Saikiani's leadership qualities, that the great woman's life was representative of the struggle of Assamese women for education, for political rights, fight against social injustice and against discrimination. Saikiani started her movement when she was only a teenager. She had immense organizational capacity and inspired by the Gandhian ideology joined the non-cooperation movement in 1921 and beckoned the womenfolk to do the same. She went around interior villages to mobilize the rural women. Under the leadership of Saikiani, the Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti was came into being in 1926. This woman struggled to make various compromises between conformity and convention. She was not only woman achievers of her time but an individual who embodied socio-cultural tension and its resolution during an era of rapid transition. She carved out an emancipated place for herself and for other women in Assam.

The opening of the Women's Wing of Assam in 1940, was an important step in drawing more women to the congress fold. Assam, being one of the states of India assumes great significance in Indian Politics. The Constitution of India has guaranteed equal political rights of citizens without discriminations on the basis of sex. But political participation of women in Assam in the parliament and state legislatures since 1950s till now has been very low. The 6th Assembly Election in 1978, Assam experienced the installation of the three successive short-lived ministries of which one was led by a women leader. She was Syeda Anwara Taimur, a renowned congress leader who took the responsibility as the chief minister of Assam since December 6 1980 to June 30, 1981. Until now she is the only female chief minister of Assam. The govt. of India came up in the new millennium by declaring the year 2001 as Women's Empowerment Year to focus on a vision where women are treated equal to men. However, Assamese women seems to be failed in achieving this vision even in 2011 Assembly Election held in the state, where out of 126 Assembly seats only 14 seats were occupied by women.

Now being a citizen of the largest democracy of the world why the Assamese women could not play active participation in politics? In the ladder of their leadership in politics there exist a variety of (both obscure and obvious) barriers. And for these barriers women have often been held back for advancing in the work place. Although there is a popular and established belief that the concrete wall that symbolized the division of labour that prohibited women



from pursuing upper-level positions previously dominated by male, has been removed, it still keeps women away from the ladder to achieve leadership. Now the question is what is holding women back?

1. Qualification?
2. Women really do not have a true desire to acquire leadership positions?
3. Men are more natural leaders than women?
4. Men are better suited for authority?
5. Women lack particular masculine personality?
6. Women are themselves responsible?

Observation shows that in present times a section of women possesses all these qualifications but still they fail to achieve equal position with male specially in politics. The conservative mindset ignores that the real barriers women face is socially constructed and that organizational structures and persistent stereotypes perpetuate gender discrimination and frustrate career advancement for women – whose desire for leadership is equal to that of men. Unlike most men, women are forced to use diverse strategies and thoughtful resolutions in order to realize their leadership goals. As here is no straight or clear path to success in career advancement for women as well as there is not a simple alternative path to take to overcome the gender gap to high-level positions, the labyrinth is a better image to explain the challenges of seeking contemporary leadership in politics.

A labyrinth is not an impossible kind of thing. If a woman successfully navigates the labyrinth, she is bound to achieve success. Now how a woman can navigate the labyrinth in proper order? For this matter a woman needs to face five major challenges. These are:

- 1. Women's experience to Gender Discrimination:** The first challenge involves how women continue to experience gender discrimination shaped by inaccurate perceptions regarding the ability for women to seek and successfully hold authority in politics. Here gender discrimination is used to describe how women are unable to secure equal political opportunities as men, even when qualifications are equivalent. Although there has been significant advancement in the last two decades for women to become leaders, the authority in these management positions is often not equal to those held by men.
- 2. Concept of the 'Double Bind':** The second major challenge that women need to face is the concept of 'Double Bind'. The double bind concept proposes that women risk being criticized as being either 'too' communal or 'too' agentic in their leadership style. If women leaders are perceived as too nice in their communications and decision making, then they are weak leaders. The paths and tactics that men take to obtain leadership positions often do not work the same for women. The double bind penalizes women for being assertive and directive in leadership, for engaging in self-promotion of achievements or taking credit for accomplishments, especially in masculine domains. As a result, women tend to avoid directive leadership styles to



avoid being perceived as too harsh. They choose to be more democratic, participative or collaborative, but are willing to mirror the styles of their male counterparts in management in male-dominated work cultures, especially in those where fewer women are employed.

- 3. Balancing Family responsibilities with Career :** Women seeking to become leaders are often impeded by parenting and household responsibilities. Although male partners of women workers are increasing their responsibilities in these two areas, it is not enough to create an even playing field as the division of labor in the home still exists. Male politicians have fewer spouses that are employed in contrast to the female. Research dispels the myth that women quit their jobs more frequently than men, but their reasons are more related to meeting family responsibilities than changing or advancing careers. Moreover, women are absent from work more in response to the demands of family resulting in loss of work hours, experience, seniority, income and perception of commitment to the job - frustrating career advancement. It is not true that women desire leadership less, as they are more likely to pursue easier jobs or that their commitment to organizations is weaker than men. Yet, parenting female workers are more likely to interrupt their careers contributing to the mindset that men are more focused on their careers than women. The routes that women take to leadership in the workplace are most simple or direct but complicated and frequently obstructed, especially for mothers.
- 4. Building Social Capital:** The next major challenge that women face as they journey through an organizational labyrinth: building social capital. Women often fail for not developing crucial professional relationships through networking. These business connections allow workers and managers to receive advice, make connections and get help in completing tasks. However, the amount of networking required to achieve social capital equal to male cohorts requires more than the standard work day and often cuts into other obligations outside of work. Yet, without these connections, women can be perceived as less influential, cooperative and legitimate. The choice of paths to leadership narrows as the opportunities that can arise from professional networking for women are not as many as their male colleagues who are more strongly invested in building social capital. Of course, the demand and the means by which to create social capital are intentional by design. The majority of organizations have been created by male leaders who typically set the norms and cultures that favor the interests of male leaders and are not so advantageous to potential female leaders. The organizational culture is at the heart of how the labyrinth is created. It is here that considerable structural change would have to occur for equal access to leadership for women and men.
- 5. Restructuring of traditional structure of Organization:** Another major challenge is connected with the traditional structure of an organization that does not support the career advancement of potential female leaders. Women report that finding a work-



life balance can be impossible with extreme time demands and expectations of travel and relocation. Women report experiencing challenges in fitting into male-dominated work cultures – from negotiating around the language and behavior that seems foreign and inauthentic to them to meeting the higher standards that are unfairly placed on women for career advancement. Organizations have also been found to deny women the opportunity to prove themselves of being good leaders by providing few professional challenges or placing them in “glass cliff” situations. These organizational structures contribute to the reason why women, more than men, leave organizations to seek high-level positions in other organizations.

Now how women can implement these strategies for success. For this woman need to understand the organizational structure. Since organizational structure is the main design of the labyrinth, plants for trimming, root pulling and replacing can be the best option to achieve success. Creation of new policies and practices may eliminate discrimination and promote gender equality. This can include promoting work life balance environments such as implementing flex work. It can involve reforming recruitment, hiring and promotion practices that make clear that leadership positions are given to those with demonstrated qualifications and not to fulfill quotas. In looking at ways to help the organization evolve, it should be recognized that modern managerial jobs are requiring skills similar to coaching and teaching as more work is being done in teams, with a higher degree of democracy rather than autocracy. Men are being encouraged to take on more communal attributes, while women are recommended to develop more agentic ones in order to achieve success in contemporary leadership. “Moving forward with progressive proposals requires activism on the part of those who desire organizations with greater gender integration and families with more equal male and female roles.” (Eagly & Carli, p. 160).

Besides women need to adopt a blended approach of being both agentic and communal while putting in extra energy in building social capital as their male colleagues. For successful leadership women are bound to establish exceptional competence as leaders, especially in difficult task, and to secure positions in line production in order to be considered more seriously for higher management positions. Women looking to significantly advance career need to build enough resources to afford child care before embarking on parenthood. However, things will be easier when both women and men become committed to successful work-life balance concept.

It is expected that this discussion will provide enough room for women to understand that the journey to leadership in politics does actually have twists and turns in which one can become lost at times and that serpentine responses will be required. Any women can achieve leadership in politics must have strong determination, personality and competence and the courage to follow the appropriate strategies. The constitutional amendments on Women Reservation Bill, Right to Equality and Opportunity, Women empowerment etc. all are



meaningless unless women themselves come forward to fight for the rightful place in political field and to make them equal with their male counterpart.

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