

Women's Perspectives on Human Rights in India: An Empirical Study of Social Perceptions and Significance in Nalbari District, Assam

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Abstract: In developing democracies like India, where social structures, customs, and economic disparities continue to impact women's lived experiences, women's human rights are a crucial component of the larger human rights discourse. The empirical study looks at how women in Assam's Nalbari area perceive, understand, and are aware of human rights. It focuses on how women's perspectives toward rights pertaining to equality, dignity, freedom, and justice are shaped by social, cultural, educational, and economic circumstances. The study contends that despite constitutional protections, patriarchal practices and unequal access to institutional support continue to mediate women's real experiences of human rights (Sen, 1999).

The results of the study show that women are becoming more conscious of their human rights, especially with relation to freedom from violence, education, and political engagement. However, due in large part to socio-cultural limitations, low legal literacy, and insufficient implementation mechanisms, there are still gaps between awareness and effective realization. The study emphasizes the necessity of more institutional outreach, gender-sensitive governance, and localized human rights education in order to guarantee that women's rights transcend legal texts and become a part of ordinary social practice (Baxi, 1998).

Keywords: Women, Human Rights, Social Perception, Gender Equality, Empirical Study, Nalbari District, Assam.



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Introduction

Regardless of gender, caste, class, or religion, human rights are universal moral and legal claims that belong to every human being. The Indian constitution offers women many protections, such as equality before the law, a ban on discrimination, and protection of life and individual freedom. However, because of deeply ingrained patriarchal systems and socioeconomic inequalities, women's lived experiences frequently deviate from these constitutional aspirations. Therefore, it is

essential to comprehend how women view human rights in order to evaluate the efficacy of institutional and legal frameworks (*Austin, 1999*).

During the late 20th century, the Indian women's rights movement saw tremendous growth, especially as a result of international human rights discourse, grassroots activity, and legal improvements. Despite these advancements, women still encounter obstacles when trying to exercise their rights and obtain justice, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas. The district of Nalbari in Assam is a pertinent location for empirical research because it offers a distinctive socio-cultural setting where traditional norms meet with growing exposure to education and political activity (*Agnes, 1999*).

The study explores societal perceptions and everyday realities, putting women's viewpoints at the heart of human rights analysis and going beyond theoretical legal arguments. Using an empirical methodology, the study seeks to comprehend how women understand human rights, recognize abuses, and view the role of society and the state in preserving their freedom and dignity. Designing inclusive and context-sensitive human rights policies requires this kind of approach (*Nussbaum, 2000*).

Background of the Study

In India, the conversation on women's human rights has changed in tandem with feminist studies, international treaties, and constitutional advancements. Despite being a signatory to a number of international human rights treaties, such as CEDAW, India's adherence to these commitments is nevertheless unequal. Women's experiences of rights in Assam have been influenced by historical marginalization, economic dependence, and restricted access to legal institutions. With its robust community networks and agrarian economy, Nalbari district offers an insightful setting for analyzing how women view and negotiate their rights in day-to-day social interactions.

Significance of the Study

The study is important because it goes beyond traditional top-down and strictly legalistic approaches by putting women's voices and lived experiences at the forefront of the human rights conversation. The study offers a comprehensive view of how rights are understood, negotiated, and applied at the grassroots level by looking at women's social perceptions of human rights in the particular setting of Nalbari district, Assam. It draws attention to the discrepancy between everyday reality and constitutional guarantees, highlighting the impact of social, cultural, and economic variables on women's capacity to exercise their rights. Policymakers, social workers, and human rights educators can benefit from the research's findings since they provide context-specific insights that can guide the creation of more inclusive, successful, and gender-sensitive programs meant to improve women's human rights in practice.

Importance of the Study

The study's significance stems from its empirical methodology and particular geographical focus on Assam's Nalbari district, which is frequently overlooked in mainstream studies on women's human rights. By providing grounded, localized evidence of women's lived experiences and societal conceptions of human rights, this research fills the gap left by the majority of the existing literature, which is still either theoretical or urban-centric. By doing this, it advances an inclusive and thorough understanding of gender and human rights in India. The study also emphasizes the necessity of grassroots interventions and policy measures by highlighting the critical role that legal literacy and social awareness play in empowering women to identify, assert, and successfully exercise their rights.

Statement of the Research Problem

There is still a big gap between official legal provisions and women's lived realities, especially in rural and semi-urban areas, even though India has a comprehensive constitutional and legal framework that guarantees women's human rights. Women still encounter institutional, social, cultural, and economic obstacles in districts of Nalbari like Assam that restrict their knowledge, comprehension, and ability to effectively exercise their human rights. Women's ideas of rights are frequently shaped by patriarchal norms, low legal literacy, economic reliance, and limited access to judicial procedures, which reduce rights to abstract ideals rather than concrete entitlements. Understanding how women in the Nalbari district view human rights, the societal variables influencing these perspectives, and the degree to which human rights safeguards are significant in their daily lives constitute the research problem this study attempts to solve. The study aims to highlight the obstacles that prevent women's rights from being realized at the grassroots level and to discover the gap between human rights guarantees and social reality by empirically analyzing women's viewpoints.

Review of Related Literature

1. Sen (1999), "Development as Freedom", believes that freedom is both a means and an end in itself. He contends that denial of rights impedes the advancement of democracy and highlights women's agency as essential to societal progress. His writings offer a theoretical framework for connecting social empowerment with human rights.
2. Baxi (1998), "The Future of Human Rights", examines the discrepancy between postcolonial societies' social realities and human rights rhetoric. He draws attention to systemic injustices and the necessity of context-sensitive human rights procedures, which are especially important for Indian women living in rural areas.
3. Flavia (1999), "Law and Gender Inequality", looks at how the lived experiences of women are frequently ignored by legal improvements. She contends that women's access to justice is restricted by patriarchal legal interpretations, highlighting the necessity of empirical research.
4. Martha (2000), "Women and Human Development", presents the capacities approach, emphasizing opportunity, choice, and dignity. Her paradigm is helpful for examining how women view rights that go beyond formal entitlements.
5. Lotika (1995), "Women and Law", examines the development of women's legal rights in India and emphasizes the difficulties in their enforcement. Her work emphasizes how crucial awareness and education are.
6. Vina (1994), "Research on Women's Studies in India", highlights how social movements and education have shaped women's awareness of equality and rights.
7. Indira (1996), "Essays on Feminist Legal Theory", highlights women's viewpoints in legal discourse, challenges gender-neutral legislation, and promotes feminist interpretations of rights.

Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of the study are-

1. To examine women's awareness of human rights in Nalbari district.
2. To analyze women's social perceptions of equality, dignity, and justice.
3. To assess the gap between legal provisions and lived experiences.
4. To identify socio-cultural factors influencing women's understanding of rights.

Research Questions

1. What is the level of awareness of human rights among women in Nalbari district?
2. How do women perceive the relevance of human rights in their daily lives?
3. What barriers do women face in exercising their rights?
4. How effective are institutions in addressing women's human rights concerns?

Research Methodology

The primary materials used in the study are structured interviews and questionnaires given to women in the Nalbari district from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. Direct interaction with women's experiences and perspectives was made possible by the empirical approach, guaranteeing that the results are grounded in reality rather than theoretical presumptions. Books, journals, government reports, and published feminist scholarship are examples of secondary sources. These resources offered contextual knowledge and theoretical support for women's human rights in India.

Results and Discussion

Awareness of Human Rights

According to the study, women in the Nalbari district have a limited and uneven understanding of human rights, mostly limited to those that are discussed in public or are visible in society. Due mostly to election campaigns, schooling, and interactions at the local level, the majority of respondents were aware of fundamental rights like the right to vote, the right to education, and the right to equality before the law. However, women were frequently unable to identify how these rights could be claimed or safeguarded in times of violation, and this awareness remained mostly conceptual rather than practical. Women who participated in self-help groups and local institutions or had some formal education showed greater awareness.

The survey discovered a considerable lack of understanding of legal remedies and enforcement methods despite this fundamental awareness. The majority of women were ignorant of legislation pertaining to property rights, employment harassment, and domestic abuse. Legal organizations including women's commissions, courts, and legal assistance cells were seen as remote and complicated. Human rights education has not sufficiently permeated rural and semi-urban social institutions, as seen by the disparity between awareness and accessibility. Without legal literacy, rights remain symbolic rather than revolutionary, as Sarkar points out (*Sarkar, 1995*)

Perception of Equality

Women's perceptions of equality reveal a profound conflict between social reality and constitutional objectives. The majority of women stated that they believed in the idea that men and women should be treated equally, but they also admitted that this equality is not frequently applied in households, businesses, or communal decision-making. Rather than being a legally enforceable right, equality was frequently regarded in terms of morality or religion. Particularly when it came to issues of domestic labor, inheritance, and mobility, many women regarded unfair treatment as a "normal" aspect of social life.

The results imply that women's perceptions of equality are greatly influenced by ingrained gender norms. Tradition, family honor, or economic dependence were common justifications offered by respondents for inequality. Women's ability to see discrimination as a violation of their rights is hampered by this absorption of patriarchal standards. Agnes contends that societal norms redefine inequality as normal and acceptable, rather than only the lack of legislation. Thus, the study emphasizes the necessity of challenging cultural beliefs in addition to legal improvements (*Agnes, 1999*)

Education and Rights Consciousness

In the Nalbari district, education was shown to be one of the most important variables promoting women's rights consciousness. Human rights themes like equality, freedom, and dignity were better understood by women with secondary or higher education. When confronted with injustice, they felt more comfortable voicing their opinions, challenging discriminatory behaviors, and asking for institutional help. Education promoted a sense of entitlement to rights in addition to increasing awareness.

Women with little to no formal education, on the other hand, frequently saw rights as privileges bestowed by society or family rather than as inalienable rights. They were more susceptible to exploitation and silence since their understanding was formed by experience rather than knowledge. The study supports Mazumdar's claim that education plays a crucial role in raising consciousness and empowering women to see their own suffering as a social and legal problem rather than a personal destiny. Therefore, increasing women's education is still essential to advancing the realization of human rights (*Mazumdar, 1994*).

Economic Dependence

Women's ability to exercise their human rights was found to be significantly hampered by economic reliance. Due to their financial reliance on male family members, a significant percentage of respondents had less influence over household decisions. Because they were afraid of financial instability, women without independent incomes were reluctant to report abuse or confront discriminatory practices. Even in cases where rights were violated, this reliance encouraged cooperation and silence.

On the other hand, women who worked for pay or engaged in other income-generating activities shown more independence and a readiness to stand up for their rights. Economic independence gave families more negotiating leverage and boosted self-assurance when interacting with public organizations. Sen's view of development emphasizes how economic capacity and freedom are closely related, and how legal rights become meaningless in the absence of material security. The results highlight the necessity of livelihood possibilities as the cornerstone of women's human rights (*Sen, 1999*).

Violence and Dignity

According to the study, women respondents' social opinions of domestic abuse are still mostly acceptable. Instead of seeing physical and mental abuse as a human rights violation, many women saw it as a private family issue. Women were inhibited from reporting abuse or seeking assistance due to social pressure to maintain family unity and fear of stigma. Even when women acknowledged that abuse was wrong, they frequently lacked the social support needed to confront it.

A significant disconnect between social acceptance and legal standards is reflected in this normalization. Despite the existence of laws safeguarding women's dignity, institutional obstacles and cultural silence prevent them from being effectively enforced. Baxi contends that when society accepts regular violence, human rights lose their capacity to be emancipatory. The report emphasizes how critical it is to reframe violence against women as a public human rights issue rather than a personal one (*Baxi, 1998*).

Role of Family

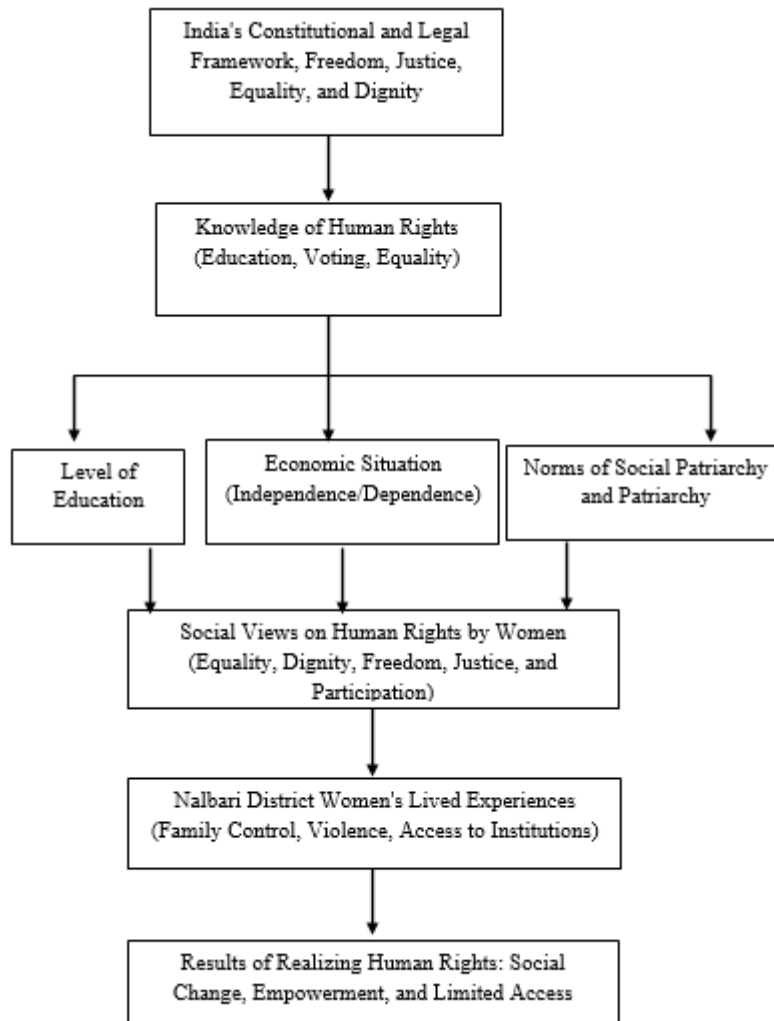
A key institution influencing women's access to human rights is the family. Women were able to pursue school, work, and involvement in public life because to supportive families. Women reported feeling more confident and informed of their rights in such situations. Family support served as a buffer against economic fragility and social discrimination.

But the family also served as a place of control and limitation in many situations. Male elders frequently made decisions about work, mobility, and marriage. When women tried to express their independence, they were met with opposition or punishment. According to Jaising, the family is a crucial setting for feminist and human rights engagement since it may both support and undermine women's rights. The results confirm that gender relations in the home need to be addressed (*Jaising, 1996*).

Institutional Access

Women in the Nalbari district were found to have unequal and restricted access to legal and administrative institutions. Courts, police stations, and legal aid offices were viewed by many respondents as costly, time-consuming, and scary. Women were deterred from pursuing formal justice by a lack of knowledge, their distance from institutions, and their fear of societal retribution.

Because of this, women mostly relied on unofficial channels like community elders or family mediation, which frequently put social peace ahead of women's rights. The efficacy of legal protections is compromised by this diminished faith in official institutions. Institutional accessibility is just as crucial as legal existence, according to Sarkar. The study emphasizes the necessity of decentralized, gender-sensitive mechanisms for delivering justice (*Sarkar, 1995*).



An explanation of the diagram

The figure shows how socioeconomic circumstances and constitutional protections combine to form women's opinions on human rights in the Nalbari district. Although formal rights are

provided by India's legal system, women's awareness of these rights is impacted by their economic standing, level of education, and existing patriarchal attitudes. Together, these elements influence how society views women's freedom, equality, and dignity. In the end, whether human rights result in empowerment, partial realization, or ongoing marginalization depends on how these perceptions are further mediated by lived experiences within the family, community, and institutions.

Social Change

The survey found that sentiments regarding human rights varied by generation. In terms of personal freedom, work, and education, younger women showed more progressive attitudes. Increased awareness and ambition were influenced by peer networks, media, and educational exposure. The perception of rights as entitlements rather than favors was more common among younger respondents.

The societal shift is still controversial and only partially implemented, though. When younger women sought autonomy, they frequently encountered opposition from communities and families. Nussbaum's capacity approach emphasizes that supportive structures that facilitate choice are just as important for social transformation as awareness. The results imply that although attitudes are changing, long-term change requires consistent institutional and cultural support (*Nussbaum, 2000*).

Table : Women's Views on Human Rights in Assam's Nalbari District

Study Dimension	Analyzed Indicators	Important Findings from the Research	Human Rights Consequences
Knowledge of Human Rights	Understanding of fundamental rights (equality, voting, and education)	Insufficient knowledge and comprehension of legal remedies	Legal knowledge and rights education are essential.
Perception of Equality	Decision-making authority and gender roles	Though history limits it, equality is respected in theory.	Constitutional equality is impeded by social conventions.
Level of Education	Schooling and formal education	Greater awareness of rights is associated with higher education.	Education increases self-assurance and agency.
Financial Situation	Employment and revenue generation	Autonomy is limited by economic dependence.	Support for livelihoods is essential for empowerment
Violence Experience	Social and domestic violence	Violence is frequently underreported and normalized.	Disparity between societal acceptance and legal protection
The function of the family	Support from family members or limitations	Family may be both a barrier and an enabler.	The home is a crucial location for the achievement of rights.
Access to Institutions	Police, courts, and legal assistance	Restricted access and poor institutional trust	Accessible and gender-sensitive justice is necessary.
Transition between Generations	Younger women's attitudes	Younger women have more progressive opinions.	Shows a slow change in society

Major Findings of the Study

The major findings of the study are-

1. The majority of women in the Nalbari area have a basic understanding of human rights, especially with regard to equality, education, and voting. But in terms of legal requirements and enforcement procedures, this understanding is mainly superficial and unclear. Rather from being viewed as legally protected rights, human rights are frequently considered in terms of morality or society. It makes more difficult for women to successfully assert or protect their rights.
2. The poor level of legal knowledge among women is one of the study's key findings. The majority of respondents were not aware of any legislation that specifically shield women against exploitation, discrimination, or abuse. Women are deterred from pursuing justice by their ignorance of legal processes, institutions, and remedies. Consequently, rights continue to be theoretical rather than practical.
3. In the Nalbari district, women's views of human rights are still shaped by patriarchal social systems. Women's liberty is often restricted while their responsibilities are defined by gender roles in the family and community. Many women absorb these standards and consider inequality to be inevitable or natural. Resistance to rights breaches is weakened by this societal conditioning.
4. The study unequivocally shows that education and human rights awareness are positively correlated. Women with higher levels of education showed more self-assurance, a better awareness of their rights, and a stronger willingness to confront discriminatory practices. Women's involvement in social and political processes was also enhanced by education. This emphasizes education as a crucial instrument for empowerment.
5. Women's ability to exercise their rights was found to be severely limited by their economic reliance on male family members. Fearing financial instability, women without a source of income frequently refrain from standing out for their rights. On the other hand, women who were financially independent had more influence over decisions. Thus, economic empowerment became essential to the achievement of rights.
6. According to the report, domestic violence is frequently considered as a private family issue and normalized. Because of societal stigma and fear of being alone, many women may not view violence as a violation of their human rights. Women are reluctant to disclose abuse, even when they are aware of legal protections. This illustrates the significant disconnect between social practice and the law.
7. Women's experiences with human rights are influenced by their families in two ways. Women's education, work, and social participation are made possible by supportive families. Restrictive family situations, on the other hand, restrict access to resources, mobility, and decision-making. As a result, the home continues to be a crucial location for both tyranny and empowerment.
8. Accessing formal justice procedures is extremely difficult for women in the Nalbari district. Many people view legal institutions as aloof, complicated, and hostile. As a result, women are forced to rely on unofficial dispute resolution procedures that seldom put women's rights first. Trust in the legal system is weakened by institutional inaccessibility.
9. The survey finds that views of human rights change noticeably between generations. Younger women typically have more progressive opinions about personal freedom, work, and education. This shift is influenced by media, social media, and educational exposure. However, the voicing of these opinions is frequently constrained by generational conflict.

10. The ongoing discrepancy between women's everyday circumstances and constitutional protections is among the most important discoveries. Although there are laws protecting women's rights, their grassroots implementation is still lacking. The implementation of rights is hampered by institutional failings, social norms, and financial limitations. Closing this gap is still quite difficult.

Conclusion

The present study, *Women's Perspectives on Human Rights in India: An Empirical Study of Social Perceptions and Significance in Nalbari District, Assam*, shows how social structures, cultural norms, and economic circumstances have a significant impact on women's perceptions and experiences of human rights. The empirical results show a continuous gap between nominal rights and lived realities, despite the fact that India's constitutional and legal frameworks promise women equality, dignity, and freedom. Although women in the Nalbari district are generally aware of their rights, especially those pertaining to political involvement and education, this awareness frequently lacks depth and actual application. Due in significant part to low legal knowledge and social conditioning that normalizes silence and unfairness, many women still view human rights as ethereal ideals rather than legally enforceable demands. Sen's claim that freedom and rights must be experienced in daily life for them to have significance is supported by this research (*Sen, 1999*).

The study also emphasizes how patriarchal social interactions still have a significant impact on how women view and use their human rights. Women's autonomy and ability to confront injustice are limited by economic dependency, household duties, and familial authority. Resistance is discouraged by social pressure to uphold family honor and communal harmony, even when women are aware of infractions like assault or discrimination. Reliance on unofficial institutions that seldom give women's dignity priority is reinforced by the perception that institutional measures intended to protect women's rights are inaccessible or ineffectual. Human rights lose their transformational potential when social acceptance of injustice takes precedence over legal norms, as Baxi notes (*Baxi, 1998*).

Therefore, the results highlight the need to address structural and cultural hurdles in addition to legal reform. The report concludes by highlighting the need for a comprehensive strategy that incorporates legal empowerment, education, economic independence, and social transformation in order to realize women's human rights. Without the backing of easily available institutions and encouraging social settings, awareness is insufficient on its own. Gender-sensitive governance, community involvement, and policy initiatives are necessary to maintain the progressive attitudes that younger women are gradually beginning to exhibit. The paper makes the case that women's human rights must be viewed as conditions that allow women to live lives of dignity, choice, and freedom rather than only as legal entitlements, drawing on Nussbaum's capacity framework (*Nussbaum, 2000*). Thus, the empirical findings from the Nalbari district provide a more comprehensive understanding of women's human rights in India and highlight the critical need to close the gap between the legislation and lived reality.

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