

### CHAPTER III

#### NATURE OF ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES OF RURAL WOMEN IN ASSAM

The study of the nature and characteristics of economic activities, especially for women and their occupational pattern is vital towards understanding the role of women in socio-economic functioning of a region. The work participation rate and occupational composition of women, and prevalent gender disparity in different economic pursuits certainly reveal the economic status of women and the system of social organization in it. In fact, the workforce and the occupational pattern among women population of a region greatly determine the character of its socio-economic progress.

Women's participation in workforce brings in two positive effects in the society- it raises the quality of living and exerts an effective control on family size. Moreover, the entire chain of production functions is also shared directly or indirectly by the women working at home or outside (Guha and Dutta, 1989). Women's economic contribution is immensely significant, although most of their works remain unpaid, unrecognized and undervalued. But in the real sense, without the long hours of work that women put in both outside and inside home, many of the economic activities would have come to a halt. Moreover, generation of productive and gainful employment with decent working conditions is viewed as a crucial strategy for 'inclusive growth' (planning commission'2010). Further it is equally important to make the employment opportunities accessible to all, especially poor and weaker sections of the society. This would require a proper understanding of the nature and characteristics of the existing and emerging labour market situation in Assam so that along with overall employment growth, issues relating to the weaker and disadvantaged groups are adequately addressed in all relevant policies. Thus women's employment status and their contribution need to be viewed in the light of this reality. In consideration of these facts, an analysis of economic characteristics of women population and their nature in the formal sector of Assam as well as Barpeta district based on secondary information particularly the Census data, is taken up in this chapter.

### 3.01 Women's Work Participation:

Table 3.01 depicts male-female work participation in India and Assam.

**Table 3.01:**  
Male-Female work participation rate in India, Assam and Barpeta District (in percent)

Country/State/District of	1991		2001	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
India	51.61	22.27	51.93	25.67
Assam	48.38	21.61	50.75	20.79
Barpeta district	47.46	10.96	47.69	14.01

Source: i) Census of India, 1991 and 2001

Table 3.0 Female work participation rate (FWPR) of Assam, as is evident from Table 3.0, is less than half of the male work participation rate. Similar feature is also observed in case of female work participation in India in 2001. The table also indicates that work participation rate of female in Assam is less than the national average. Female work participation rate of Barpeta District is still lower by almost 6 percent than average figure of Assam in 2001. Moreover, the female work participation rate of India increased by almost 3 percent as against 1 percent decrease in Assam during 1991-2001. Although the FWPR of Barpeta District increased by almost 3 percent during 1991-2001, it is much less than average figure of Assam. Various reasons may be ascribed for such low work participation of females. Generally women are confined to work at home and seldom work outside because of prejudices and the traditional gender division of labour. Factors like increase in family income and underestimation of various household work performed by female may also responsible for such low FWPR. Additionally, the level of urbanization also has a direct bearing on women's work participation in the areas concerned. Hence, an analysis of women's work participation separately for rural and urban areas of the region would perhaps make the picture clearer.

### 3.02. Rural-Urban Differential in Female Work Participation:

There is not only low female work participation in Assam, but also there exists rural urban differentials. Table 3.02 depicts male-female work participation in rural and urban areas of Assam and India.

**Table 3.02**  
Male-Female work participation (in percent) in rural and urban areas of  
India, Assam and Barpeta District

Country/State/ District of	1991				2001			
	Rural		Urban		Rural		Urban	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
India	52.58	26.79	48.92	9.19	52.36	30.97	50.84	11.54
Assam	43.57	23.17	20.51	7.58	49.76	22.27	51.02	10.29
Barpeta district	48.03	11.47	46.40	4.19	49.10	11.89	47.11	4.68

Source: Census of India, 1991 and 2001

The work participation rate among the urban women is considerably lower than their male counterpart in most parts of Assam as in many other parts of the country. As a matter of fact, in a male dominated agrarian economy of a country like India, the women, particularly in the urban areas, have fewer non-farm job opportunities. Moreover, in a highly segmented as well as segregated labour market in India, women are primarily engaged in informal non-farm activities whereas men flock into the organized employment sector, especially in the urban areas. In rural areas women's workforce participation is higher compared to males because of female engagement both as family labour in their land or as agricultural labourer in other people's land. Such a situation results in the significantly high rural-urban differential in women's work participation in most parts of the country. With work participation rates of females almost 31 percent in the rural areas and almost 12 percent in urban areas according to the 2001 census, Assam, however, occupies relatively a better position than the national average (Rural: around 22 percent, Urban: around 10 percent). In other words, the rural-urban differential of FWPR was almost 12 percent in Assam as against almost 20 percent at national level in 2001. In 1991 also, the rural-urban differential in women work participation in Assam was lower than the country's average. It was almost 15 percent in Assam in comparison to almost 18 percent at national level. Although, rural-urban differential of FWPR in Barpeta District was almost 7 percent in 1991 and 2001, yet the FWPR was almost half of the average figure of Assam. Although FWPR in urban and rural areas of

Assam as well as in India changed during 1991-2001, yet the rate of change was different. For example, the FWPR in rural India increased by almost 4 percent in comparison to almost 1 percent decrease in rural Assam. Further, the FWPR in urban India increased by almost 2 percent in comparison to almost 3 percent increase in Assam. However, the FWPR in rural and urban areas of Barpeta District was almost the same in 1991 and 2001 although female literacy rate increased during this period. High rural-urban differential in FWPR may be due to the fact that the nature of rural works is largely agricultural where females undertake various activities including sowing, winnowing, threshing and other crop harvesting related activities. In urban areas, women with higher educational levels have to compete with men for limited job opportunities. Again, women with lower educational level are often engaged in low paid, semi skilled informal jobs. Again, female of the category of housewives constitute a large proportion of the female residing in urban areas. Early exit of women (probably post marital age) from labour market may be another reason for low FWPR in urban areas where women face inadequate social and family support system. The FWPR in Barpeta District was very low in both rural and urban areas which may be due to lack of diverse employment opportunities and social restrictions on the mobility of females to work outside.

Moreover, there are also high male-female differentials in WPR in both rural and urban areas of Assam as well as in India. The male-female differential of WPR was almost 20 percent in rural Assam and as low as 13 percent in urban Assam in 1991 which rapidly increased to almost 27 percent in rural areas of Assam in 2001 and as high as 41 percent in urban Assam. Such differential in rural India was almost 26 percent and almost 40 percent in urban India in 1991 which decreased to almost 21 percent in rural areas and 39 percent in urban areas in 2001. However, the male-female differential of WPR was higher in Barpeta District than the differential in Assam in both 1991 and 2001. It was almost 36 percent in rural areas and almost 42 percent in urban areas of Barpeta District in 1991 and increased to 37 percent in rural areas and almost 42 percent in urban areas in 2001. Work force participation by women is an important indicator of empowerment and development. Women are generally engaged in household activities such as bearing and rearing of children and in the production of goods and services for household consumption. Therefore, women's work at home remains unrecognized since no monetary value is assigned to such activities. Therefore, the work participation for female against wages is

considered to be economically productive activity since the women can make visible monetary contribution to the household. In recent census, women are considered as workers who make significant contribution in the agricultural operations like sowing, harvesting, transplantation, tending cattle and even cooking and delivering food to the farm during the agricultural operation. Therefore, male-female gap in WPR in rural areas has been lower than urban areas. However, in urban areas, women do not have as much work opportunities and with higher average per capita income in urban areas, women usually withdraw from the labour market. According to Indian census, a place is defined as urban if it satisfied that 75 percent of its male workers are engaged in non-agriculture sector. Therefore, the gap of work force participation rate will be much more for male than female in urban areas, even though women are engaged in productive household activities with no direct financial gain for the household in terms income earned.

### 3.03. Age-Specific Female Work Participation Rate (ASFWPR)

Age and sex are the two important demographic characteristics. The distribution of female population by age group could improve the understanding of the results on employments.

Table 3.03

Age-Specific Usual Status (Ps+Ss) Female Worker Population Ratio in India & Assam by Area of Residence

(per cent)

India Rural			Assam Rural			India Urban			Assam Urban			India Rural			Assam Rural			India Urban			Assam Urban			
1993-94			1993-94			1993-94			1993-94			2004-05			2004-05			2004-05			2004-05			
P <sub>s</sub>	S <sub>s</sub>	All	P <sub>s</sub>	S <sub>s</sub>	All	P <sub>s</sub>	S <sub>s</sub>	All	P <sub>s</sub>	S <sub>s</sub>	All	P <sub>s</sub>	S <sub>s</sub>	All	P <sub>s</sub>	S <sub>s</sub>	All	P <sub>s</sub>	S <sub>s</sub>	All	P <sub>s</sub>	S <sub>s</sub>	All	
0.1	0.1	0.2	0	0	0	0	0.1	0.1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1.1	0.4	1.5	0.2	0.2	0.4	0.5	0	0.5	0.9	0	0.9	0.4	0.4	0.8	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.3	0	0	0.2	0	0.2	
8.3	3.4	11.7	3.8	3.0	6.7	3.9	1.2	5.1	2.9	0.4	3.3	3.5	7.0	10.5	3.9	3.1	7.1	4.0	1.2	5.2	2.6	1.1	3.7	
8.0	3.2	11.2	3.1	2.3	6.3	4.7	1.3	6.0	3.1	0.7	3.8	4.7	8.0	12.7	5.4	4.6	9.9	5.8	1.2	7.0	2.6	1.8	4.4	
4.7	1.7	6.4	1.4	1.0	2.3	2.7	1.0	3.1	0.8	0.2	1.0	2.7	4.0	6.7	1.9	1.3	3.2	2.7	0.6	3.3	2.3	0.2	2.5	
1.4	0.4	1.8	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.8	-0.1	0.7	0.3	0	0.3	0.8	1.1	6.9	0.2	0.3	0.5	0.7	0.1	0.8	0.1	0.0	0.1	
23.4	9.4	32.8	8.6	7.3	15.9	12.1	3.4	15.5	7.9	1.3	9.2	12.1	20.5	32.6	11.4	9.5	20.9	13.5	3.1	16.6	7.8	3.1	10.9	

Source: Calculated from NSSO Reports of 50<sup>th</sup> (Report No. 409, p.487, 490) and 61<sup>st</sup> (Report No. 515, p.105, 108) Rounds, using population data of that rounds

Table 3.03 throws up many crucial features about age-specific female worker population ratio (ASFWPR) at rural and urban levels during 1993-94 to 2004-05. The major age groups are 15-29 years, 30-44 years and 45-59 years. It shows that in rural India, in all the younger age groups up to 25-29 years, there is a broad downward drift in age-specific FWPRs during 1993-94 to 2004-05 as against marginal increase in Assam, although ASFWPR of Assam is almost 3 percent less than all India level. For major age group 15-29 years, the ASFWPR declined by around 1 percent in rural India during 1993-94 to 2004-05 as against around 0.5 percent increase in Assam. But it is not true for urban females. In urban areas it has declined only up to 10-14 years age group. In rural and urban areas increase in FWPR has been noticed in the 30-44 years. It increased by around 1.5 per cent in rural India and by 1 percent in urban India as against around 4 percent increase in rural Assam and only 0.6 percent increase in urban Assam. In both the rural and urban areas of India no major increase in FWPR has been observed in any age group. But in Assam, the highest increase in FWPR in rural areas took place in the age group of 30-44 years (around 4 percent) during 1993-94 to 2004-05 as against highest increase in urban Assam in the age group 45-59 years i.e. 1.5 percent.

In all the major age groups which are 15-29, 30-34 and 45-59, female WPR at rural India reduced to about half in Principal Status (Ps) and increased doubly in Subsidiary Status (Ss) during 1993-94 to 2004-05. Though in rural India female WPR in post-reform period remained almost same but it is a matter of concern that in rural India in Ps category it reduced to half i.e. from 23.4 percent in 1993-94 to 12.1 percent in 2004-05 and in Subsidiary Status (Ss) category, it increased to more than double i.e. from 9.4 percent in 1993-94 to 20.5 percent in 2004-05. At urban level, FWPR increased by 1.1 percentage point i.e. from 15.5 percent in 1993-94 to 16.6 percent in 2004-05. The total increase at urban level took place in Ps female workers. As against after the age group 15-29 years, in rural Assam FWPR in Ps and Ss categories increased in all the age groups, but relatively more increase took place in Ss category. At urban level again, the rise is in Ss category of female workers. Thus, older persons are entering the labour market in recent times. This may be due to impact of inflation exerting economic pressure on households compelling women of all ages to look for work opportunities outside the home domain. Another social cause is likely to be the breaking up of joint families into nuclear ones building up additional economic pressure.

In 2004-05 in the age group of 5-9 years, no female child worker has been noticed in rural and urban areas of Assam. In other child age group (10-14), the percentage of female child workers also reduced in the state at both the levels. This may be due to increasing awareness levels regarding education, and efforts of many schemes and programmes like mid-day-meal scheme etc. encouraging households to send their children to schools and are thus leaving the labour market.

### **3.04. Education Specific Female Worker Population Ratio (ESFWPR)**

Literacy rate is generally accepted as one of the basic indicators of progress of the population; and educational level of a population is one of the most important determinants of its quality. In a vast country like India, the literacy rate, as well as educational level, exhibits wide variation among different socio-economic categories like region, gender, social group, etc. Since the level of illiteracy in the female population is very high, this is more or less reflected in the educational status of female workers — most of the employed females are illiterate and poor in educational attainment.

The types of education women receive, contribute to their employment. But women are found to be over represented in general education without any skill orientation and professional qualification. It suggests the role of socio-cultural institutions such as families, which mediates micro level decisions regarding education and employment of women with the perceived requirements of marriage. Emerging norms of femininity dictate that women use their education in the interests of marriage to be accomplished wives and better mothers (Osella & Osella, 2000).

For working out education specific female worker population ratios, the females of age 15 years and above are classified into six categories.

It has been observed from Table 3.04 that the ESFWPR in rural areas of Assam increased at all levels of education during 1993-94 to 2004-05 except in graduate and above whereas at national level ESFWPR rate increased up to secondary education level only. On the other hand, in urban areas of Assam the education levels show rise for working women except for middle educated, whereas for India it shows increase in FWPR for all education levels except secondary level and above. Overall ESFWPR in Assam increased by 13.9 percentage points whereas it was almost stagnant at all India level during 1993-94 to 2004-05. The possible reasons may be that 87 percent of Assam population live in rural areas. Literacy rate and education

level is poor in rural areas. For illiterate and lowly literate women it is easy to enter the primary sector. On the other hand, women with higher education prefer to into a profession of her choice rather to sit idle.

**Table 3.04**  
**Education Specific Usual Status of Rural and Urban Female Employment in Assam**  
**(age 15 years and above)**

(in percent)

Level of Ed.	Rural				Urban			
	1993-94		2004-05		1993-94		2004-05	
	India	Assam	India	Assam	India	Assam	India	Assam
Not literate	54.0	30.4	55.0	27.3	30.0	14.8	30.4	22.3
Literate & up to Primary	41.6	20.8	44.9	35.8	20.3	1.7	23.4	15.7
Middle	29.0	13.1	37.1	36.5	13.1	8.2	16.1	6.8
Secondary	25.8	14.8	30.5	25.4	13.4	12.0	12.3	14.1
Higher Secondary	23.4	13.4	25.2	23.3	14.7	11.6	12.9	11.4
Graduate and above	36.6	44.6	34.5	43.2	30.1	21.4	29.0	30.9
All	48.6	23.9	48.5	31.8	22.3	11.7	22.7	15.4

*Source: NSSO Report of 50<sup>th</sup> (Report No.409) and 61<sup>st</sup> (Report No.515) Rounds*

Educational achievements fail to give any satisfactory explanation for low female employment rate. It is quite surprising that women are more educated than men across all educational categories except diploma and secondary education. In higher education also, women are more represented than men (NSSO 2004-05). But unfortunately women's edge over men in educational achievements is not translated into gainful employment opportunities. Though educational status of women has improved a lot but still they suffer from unemployment almost three times more to men. Thus it can be said that women's education has not played the transformative role generally expected of it. Low levels of female employment and persistence of a gendered work structure have limited women's claims to independent sources of income.

Given the very low employment level of women, high educational achievements attained by them do not seem to change the gender role divisions in the society.

It therefore arises from the available data that rather than labour market conditions, the likely explanation for such high levels of unemployment among educated women are lack of opportunities as well as people's deep-seated beliefs about women's gender role in society.

### 3.05. Female work participation rate in Main, Marginal Category and non-workers:

The census of India defined main workers as those who had worked for the major part of the year preceding the date of enumeration i.e. those who were engaged in any economically productive activity for 183 days (or six months) or more during a year. Marginal workers were defined as those who had worked any time at all in the year preceding the enumeration but did not work for a major part of the year i.e. those who worked for less than 183 days (or six months). On the other hand, non workers were defined as those who had not worked any time at all in the year preceding the day of enumeration.

Table 3.05 depicts Male-female work participation rate of main, marginal and non-workers in Assam and its three broad regions.

Table 3.05:

Region wise work participation rate of main, marginal and non-workers in Assam (in percent)

Area	Main workers				Marginal workers				Non workers			
	1991		2001		1991		2001		1991		2001	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Lower Assam	48.41	7.79	42.97	7.30	0.45	6.38	5.68	8.64	44.13	83.37	51.30	84.05
Central Assam	49.08	12.88	42.60	10.03	1.19	13.19	9.00	13.74	49.71	73.92	48.39	76.20
Upper Assam	47.87	18.01	41.42	12.28	1.53	6.55	8.88	12.29	50.59	75.43	49.69	75.42
Barpeta District	47.46	4.04	42.91	5.69	0.45	6.92	4.89	8.31	52.08	89.03	52.18	85.98
Assam	48.38	12.56	42.34	9.68	1.06	9.04	7.58	11.11	50.55	78.38	50.06	79.20

Source: Census of India, 1991 and 2001

Table 3.05 reveals that the percentage of both male and female main workers decreased in Assam during the period 1991-2001. But there were huge male-female

gap of main workers. It was almost 30 percent in 1991 which had marginally declined to 29 percent in 2001. It indicates that males were engaged in more assured productive activities than females. Region wise, the percentage of female main workers to the total female population were lower in industrially backward Lower Assam and Barpeta District of Assam in comparison to average figure of Assam in 1991 and 2001. However, the percentage of female main workers to the total female population were higher in Central and Upper Assam in comparison to the average figure of Assam in 1991 and 2001 as because these regions are industrially advanced (particularly tea industries) in comparison to Lower Assam.

As men migrate in search of better paid work, women particularly in rural areas are taking over agricultural work in the villages. They face meager wages, long hours and hazardous work. Figures from the census show that, amongst women, the percentage of "marginal workers" (defined as working for less than 183 days per year) has increased significantly in Assam from about 9 percent in 1991 to about 11 percent in 2001. During the same period, there was a sharp fall in the percentage of "main workers" (more than 183 days a year). The figures thus show a casualisation and feminization of the work force, with the number of marginal women workers growing significantly. Region wise, the percentage of female marginal workers in Central Assam was the highest, although it has remained stagnant at around 13 percent over the period 1991-2001. During the same period, there was a sharp rise in the percentage of female marginal workers by around 6 percent in Upper Assam, and only 2 percent in Lower Assam and Barpeta District. In fact, the percentage of female marginal workers in Upper and Central Assam was more than average figure of Assam in both 1991 and 2001. It indicates not only significant regional variation in female marginal workers, but also possibility of higher incidence of unemployment among females. As marginal work is uncertain and related to irregular income, the significant percent of female marginal workers also indicate poverty and inequality.

Moreover, the percentage of female non-workers was higher than males in both 1991 and 2001. The male-female gap of non-workers was almost 28 percent in Assam in 1991 which marginally increased to 29 percent in 2001. Region wise, the male-female gap of non-workers was the highest in Lower Assam in both 1991 and 2001. It was almost 39 percent in 1991 and 33 percent in 2001. On the other hand, it was lowest in Upper Assam, i.e. around 25 percent in 1991 and 2001. Central Assam recorded around 24 percent male-female gap of non-workers in 1991 and increased to

28 percent in 2001. The male-female gap of non-workers in Barpeta District was almost similar to Central Assam, i.e. around 28 percent. Two important causes may be noted for such high percentage of female non-workers than males. First, most of the household works of females are invisible and such works are not counted during census period and second, majority of females did not work any time at all in the year preceding the date of enumeration either due to income effect or due to social restrictions not to allow females to work outside home.

### 3.06. Age-group wise Labour by sex in Assam:

Table 3.06 depicts age-group wise percentage of main and marginal workers to the total main and marginal workers in Assam.

Table: 3.06

Age group wise labour by sex in Assam (Percentage to total main and marginal workers)

State/ Country	Age groups years	Main workers				Marginal workers			
		1991		2001		1991		2001	
		Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Assam	5-14	1.89	3.68	1.63	3.17	12.21	7.24	11.62	6.88
	15-59	89.31	90.82	90.16	91.63	81.47	87.78	82.74	88.80
	Above 60	8.80	5.50	8.10	5.09	6.32	4.98	5.55	4.22
India	5-14	1.93	3.12	1.49	2.99	10.1	7.38	9.19	6.76
	15-59	89.16	89.94	89.98	90.38	81.08	85.80	82.50	86.64
	Above 60	8.91	6.94	8.30	6.39	8.82	6.82	8.05	6.38

Source: Population Census of India, 1991 and 2001

It has been observed from Table 3.06 that the percentage of female main workers to the total main workers of females in Assam were 3.68 and 3.17 percent in the age group 5-14 years in 1991 and 2001 respectively as against only 1.89 and 1.63 percent of males during the same year and same category. Further, the percentage of female main workers to the total main workers of females in Assam were 5.50 and 5.09 percent in the age group above 60 years in 1991 and 2001 respectively as against 8.80 and 8.10 percent of males during the same period. The corresponding figures in India were 3.12 and 2.99 percent of females as against 1.93 and 1.49 percent of males in 1991 and 2001 respectively in the age group 5-14 years. Further, the percentage of female main workers to the total main workers of females in India were 6.94 and 6.39

percent in the age group above 60 years in 1991 and 2001 respectively as against 8.91 and 8.30 percent of males during the same period.

Higher percentage of female main workers in the age group 5-14 years than males in both Assam and India indicates more child labour among females than males. Similarly, significant percent of female main workers in the age group above 60 in both Assam and India indicates poverty where aged people are compelled to work due to economic necessity. It is however satisfactory to note that the percentage of female main workers in the age group 15-59 were higher than males in both Assam and India. The percentage of female main workers to the total female workers in the age group 15-59 years were 90.82 and 91.63 percent in Assam as against 89.31 and 90.16 percent of males in 1991 and 2001 respectively. The corresponding figures in India were 89.94 and 90.38 percent of females as against 89.16 and 89.98 percent of males in 1991 and 2001 respectively.

It has also been observed from Table 3.04 that the percentage of female marginal workers to the total marginal workers of females in Assam were 7.24 and 6.88 percent in the age group 5-14 years in 1991 and 2001 respectively as against 12.21 and 11.62 percent of males during the same period. Further, the percentage of female marginal workers to the total marginal workers of females in Assam were 4.98 and 4.22 percent in the age group above 60 years in 1991 and 2001 respectively as against 6.32 and 5.55 percent of males during the same period. The corresponding figures in India were 7.38 and 6.76 percent of females as against 10.1 and 9.19 percent of males in 1991 and 2001 respectively in the age group 5-14 years. Further, the percentage of female marginal workers to the total marginal workers of females in India were 6.82 and 6.38 percent in the age group above 60 years in 1991 and 2001 respectively as against 8.82 and 8.05 percent of males during the same period. It has been observed that the percentage of female marginal workers to the total female marginal workers were smaller than males in the age group 5-14 and above 60 years in 1991 and 2001 in both Assam and India. But the percentages of female marginal workers were significant. It indicates the same phenomenon of poverty where most of the females are compelled to work either in childhood or old age due to economic necessity. Moreover, the percentage of female marginal workers to the total female marginal workers were higher than males in 1991 and 2001 in the age group 15-59 years in both Assam and India indicating prevalence of more unemployment among females. The percentage of female marginal workers to the total female marginal

workers in the age group 15-59 years were 87.78 and 88.80 percent in Assam in 1991 and 2001 respectively as against 81.47 and 82.74 percent of males during the same period. The corresponding figures in India were 85.80 and 86.64 percent of females in the age group 15-59 years as against 81.08 and 82.50 percent of males in 1991 and 2001 respectively.

### 3.07. Occupational structure:

The occupational structure among the women workers in a region is indicative of the role played by the women in its economy. This also reflects the degree of economic advancement of a region. The composition of economic activities of workers may be analysed in terms of proportion of workers (male or female) in different categories out of the total main workers, as defined by the census of India. However, for convenience of analysis all the occupational categories are grouped into three major sectors- primary, secondary and tertiary.

Table 3.07 depicts distribution of male/female main workers in primary, secondary and tertiary sectors in India and Assam.

Table 3.07

Distribution of male/female main workers in Primary, secondary and tertiary sectors in Assam and India (in percent)

State/Country	1991						2001					
	Primary		Secondary		Tertiary		Primary		Secondary		Tertiary	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Assam (Rural)	79.42	90.92	4.14	2.86	16.44	6.22	58.49	60.33	7.93	1.69	31.72	39.80
Assam (Urban)	9.51	12.25	20.30	11.46	70.19	76.29	2.42	3.98	7.15	1.83	88.85	95.74
India (Rural)	80.36	89.80	7.29	5.54	12.35	4.66	69.67	79.85	2.83	5.44	27.49	14.69
India (Urban)	13.26	22.94	31.06	20.97	55.68	52.09	6.4	15.29	3.50	12.93	90.09	71.77
Barpeta district (Rural)	80.12	86.44	3.26	2.90	19.87	10.66	75.0	82.21	2.90	3.65	22.1	14.14
Barpeta dist.(Urban)	8.46	6.43	19.19	10.19	72.35	83.38	6.29	5.18	11.20	6.24	82.51	88.58

Source: a) Census of India, 1991 and 2001

b) Basic statistics of NER, 2002

It has been observed from Table 3.07 that the percentage of female main workers engaged in primary sector was almost 91 percent in 1991 and 60 percent in

2001 in rural Assam. The corresponding figures of males were almost 79 percent in 1991 and around 58 per cent in 2001. Thus, primary occupation singularly provides employment to majority of main workers, though their proportion has been declining. It suggests that there is gradual shift of workers from agricultural to non-agricultural occupations. But it is discouraging to note that the percentage of female main workers engaged in the primary occupations were higher than males. The male-female gap engaged in primary sector was almost 11 percent in 1991 and it was reduced to almost 2 percent in 2001. Of course, the respective proportions among females and males in India as a whole are no less different (Table 3.07). Thus, there is a trend towards the balancing of sex differential, reducing the gap between both sexes from 11 percent in 1991 to 2 percent in 2001 in rural Assam and almost 9 percent in 1991 to 10 percent in 2001 in rural India. Although the male-female gap of main workers engaged in primary sector was less than national level in rural areas of Assam, yet majority of workers are still employed in agricultural activities. As agriculture provides seasonal employment during cropping season, so chances of hidden employment are big. It also indicates that secondary and tertiary sector have failed to generate enough employment opportunities making a pressure on primary sector. Although the percentage of female main workers engaged in primary sector was almost 4 percent lower in rural areas of Barpeta District than average figure of Assam in 1991, it was almost 12 percent higher in 2001. Moreover, the male-female gap of main workers engaged in primary sector increased to almost 7 percent in 2001 as against 6 percent in 1991. Although educated and skill workforce do get employed in secondary and tertiary sector but for unskilled and semi-skilled workers have no alternatives rather than to depend upon primary sector. This fact inhibits the adoption of agricultural innovation in Barpeta District.

The underlying occupational characteristics of the women workers in Assam would be further clear when the analysis is made separately for the rural and urban areas. It is worth mentioning that the share of female workers in the primary occupations in the urban areas of Assam (around 4 percent in 2001) is lower than rural areas (around 6 percent). The pattern in this respect is more or less the same at the national level. It is primarily because of the fact that a large proportion of rural women is economically and educationally backward than urban women. However, occupational diversity may be significantly lower in rural areas, since a larger proportion of both female and male workers is engaged in the primary sector.

In contrast to the high proportion of female workers in the primary sector, only around 2 percent of female main workers are engaged in secondary sector in rural areas as against around 8 percent of males. During 1991-2001, the percentage of female main workers engaged in secondary sector in rural areas not only decreased by almost 1 percent but also the male-female gap has been widened from 1 percent in 1991 to almost 6 percent in 2001. The scenario is deteriorating in urban areas of Assam where the percentage of female main workers engaged in secondary sector decreased rapidly by almost 10 percent during 1991-2001. However, the male-female gap which was almost 9 percent in 1991 decreased to around 5 percent in 2001. Thus, the percentage of main workers engaged in secondary sector decreased for both males and females during 1991-2001, but the proportion of females decreased more sharply than males. The picture is somewhat different at national level, where the percentage of female main workers engaged in secondary sector was almost 3 percent higher in rural areas and almost 9 percent higher in urban areas in 1991 than Assam. Moreover, the percentage of female main workers engaged in secondary sector was almost 3 percent higher in rural areas and almost 9 percent higher in urban areas than males at national level in 2001. Although the percentage of female main workers engaged in secondary sector in rural areas of Barpeta District increased by almost 1 percent during 1991-2001, over the same period it decreased by around 4 percent in urban areas. Moreover, the male-female gap of which was around 1 percent in rural areas in 2001, rapidly widened to around 5 percent in urban areas. Lack of industrial and associated infrastructural development is the primary cause of low percentage share of female workers in secondary sector in Assam, as also at national level. Moreover, Assam is lagging behind in industrialization due to various causes like lack of entrepreneurship, inadequate infrastructural development and lack of capital. Although Assam has several cottage and handloom industries, yet the said industry has been facing stiff competition particularly during the period of economic globalization. Again, the allied activities of the primary sector and development of village industries could not make much headway particularly in Assam in engaging the surplus population from the agricultural sector. All these may lead to growing pressure of population on agricultural sector and resulted in widespread disguised unemployment in rural areas.

However, of particular importance are the changes in occupational structure that have taken place in the 1991-2001 decade in the tertiary sector. Alongside, and

perhaps reflecting the modest rise in per capita income, the shift away from agriculture to tertiary sector is somewhat significant in 2001 compared to 1991 or even earlier. It is so in the sense that just as there is a fall in the share of agriculture, there is an almost an equal rise in the tertiary sector. Or in other words, the fall in the agricultural sector has been largely made up by a rise in the tertiary sector. The manufacturing sector has shown a marginal fall of no significance. For example, the percentage of female main workers engaged in primary sector declined by almost 30 percent during 1991-2001 in rural Assam and such percentage increased by almost 33 percent in tertiary sector during the same period. This means that the change in the occupational structure in 1991-2001 decade signifies rising work in the services sector, rather than in the commodity sector. This perhaps points to the emergence of positive growth forces in the economy. However, there are urban-rural inequalities regarding engagement of male and female workers in tertiary sector. The urban-rural gap of male workers engaged in tertiary sector was almost 54 percent in 1991 in Assam which was marginally increased to 57 percent in 2001. Such gap was more for females which was almost 70 percent in 1991 and was reduced to 56 percent in 2001. In other words, the urban-rural gap of male and female main workers engaged in tertiary sector was almost same in 2001 in Assam. At the national level also the urban-rural gap of male main workers engaged in tertiary sector was almost 43 percent which was marginally higher for female i.e., almost 47 percent in 1991. In 2001, such gap increased to almost 62 percent for males and 57 percent for females. Such urban-rural gap indicates more employment avenues in tertiary sector in urban areas than rural areas. Thus the level of urbanization in true sense is no less an important factor in the increase of female participation in tertiary sector in Assam. However, improvement in female literacy has opened avenues for the females to go for different public and private sector jobs throughout the state.

The percentage of female main workers engaged in tertiary sector in rural areas of Barpeta District of Assam was almost one third to the average figure of Assam. Moreover, there is male-female gap by almost 8 percent in rural areas in 2001. In urban areas, however, the percentage of female main workers engaged in tertiary sector was almost 6 times more than rural areas. The considerably lower proportion of female workers in the tertiary sector of rural areas of Barpeta District may be attributed to the dominance of farm activities and backward infrastructural facilities than Assam as a whole.

The occupational structure of Assam and India discussed above reflects that a substantial proportion of rural work force is engaged in primary sector and a very small proportion has been found to be engaged in secondary and tertiary sectors. Moreover, there are also male-female and urban-rural differentials. But, still agriculture remains the major economic activity of a very large proportion of the working population.

### 3.08. Distribution of main workers by Industrial categories:

Table 3.08 depicts distribution of main workers by industrial categories in Assam, Barpeta district and India.

**Table 3.08**  
Distribution of female main workers by industrial categories (in percent)

Country/State/ District	Categories	1991		2001	
		Male	Female	Male	Female
India	i) Cultivators	38.40	34.22	31.33	32.50
	ii) Agricultural Labourers	26.40	44.93	20.82	39.42
	iii) Livestock, Forestry, Fishery, Hunting and plantations, orchards and allied activities	1.90	1.60	-	-
	iv) Mining and quarrying	0.60	0.34	-	-
	v) Household industry	-	-	3.01	6.36
	vi) Other workers	-	-	44.82	21.70
Assam	i) Cultivators	50.89	50.93	45.03	40.42
	ii) Agri labourer	12.10	12.01	14.23	16.48
	iii) Livestock, Forestry, Fishery, hunting and plantations, orchards and allied activities	7.41	23.44	-	-
	iv) Mining and quarrying	0.58	0.10	-	-
	v) Household Industry	-	-	2.28	7.89
	vi) Other workers	-	-	38.91	35.20
Barpeta district	i) Cultivators	59.55	43.63	48.35	30.86
	ii) Agri. Labourers	15.66	28.55	16.64	19.24
	iii) Livestock, Forestry etc.	8.13	14.21	-	-
	iv) Mining & Quarring	0.48	0.09	-	-
	v) Household Industry	-	-	2.90	15.04
	vi) Other workers	-	-	32.11	34.84

Source: Census of India, 1991 and 2001

The working population of Assam and India has been grouped into six occupational classes (Table 3.08). Changes in occupational structure may throw some

light in the understanding of the economy. Cultivation singularly provides employment to more than three-fourths of the workers both for males and females, though their (cultivators and agricultural labourers) proportions have been declining during 1991-2001. It suggests that there is gradual shift of workers from agricultural to non-agricultural occupations. But this is not the case. In fact workers have been grouped into two broad groups, viz. main workers marginal workers; and occupational classifications of only main workers is available in 1991 and 2001. Most of the marginal workers are seasonally engaged as agricultural labourers, but have been excluded from the class of workers. This exclusion may reduce the size of agricultural labourers.

It has been observed from Table 3.08 that the percentage of female cultivators to the main workers was not only higher than males in India, by almost 1 percent in 2001, but also declined very slowly during the period 1991-2001. During this decade, the percentage of male cultivators at national level declined by almost 7 percent as against around 2 percent of females. In Assam, however, the percentage of male and female cultivators was almost same i.e. around 50 percent in 1991 which declined by around 10 percent for females in 2001 as against around 5 percent for males. Almost same phenomenon has been observed in Barpeta District where the percentage of female cultivators declined by around 13 percent as against 11 percent of males during the decade 1991-2001. But still, majority of female main workers are cultivators. Although transplanting and harvesting is mainly done by female workers, yet they are not allowed to participate in ploughing and some other selected farm activities. This may be the possible reason for higher proportion of male main workers engaged as cultivators than females in Assam and Barpeta District. Further, majority of females are still denied for land title, though few instances are found for transfer of land ownership to females with a view to escape the land ceiling laws. This may be one of the important reasons for increase in the percentage of female agricultural labourers in Assam during 1991-2001. It has been observed from Table 3.06 that the percentage of female agricultural labourers increased in Assam by almost 4 percent during 1991-2001 as against 5 percent decline at national level during the same period. However, the percentage of female main workers engaged as agricultural labourers declined by 9 percent in Barpeta District during 1991-2001 with a high proportion of female workers in household industry and other workers group than average figure of Assam. Nevertheless, almost half of the active female man power of

Barpeta District and more than half of Assam are used in agricultural activities, which mirror the backwardness and primitive culture of the region. Such community, called a closed economy, emphasizes on individual or household self sufficiency and causes so high proportion of agricultural workers.

As mentioned earlier, there is a gradual shift of workers from agricultural to non-agricultural sectors. Consequently, percentage of female main workers engaged in household industry was almost 1 percent more in Assam for both males and females than national average. In Barpeta District, however, the percentage of female main workers engaged in household industry was almost two times than average figure of Assam. The possible reason for such higher percentage of female workers engaged in household industry may be the relatively strong base of handloom and weaving. However, weaving has not been adopted as commercial activities and the women engaged in weaving operations may also be engaged in farm activities. Moreover, other types of artifact like pottery; jewellery works etc. are associated with a certain community. Thus, it is caste structure which often determines the occupational structure of population.

Bulk of the employment in Assam and Barpeta District is concentrated in the agriculture sector. In rural areas, agriculture constitutes up to 58 percent of the total rural employment. Approximately 60 percent female workers and 58 percent male workers in rural areas of Assam are engaged in agriculture as against 75 percent of male workers and 82 percent of female workers of Barpeta District. Obviously, most of the workers engaged in agriculture are highly under-employed with very low levels of return. Diversification of the rural workforce to non-agriculture activities has been very low and the same has been negligible in case of the rural women workforce. Despite slow diversification process from farm to non-farm activities, the agriculture sector has reflected enough dynamism in recent years. Although diversification of the female workforce to non-farm activities in rural areas has been limited up to 6 to 7 percent since 1991, the same in case of male workers has been to the extent of 16 to 17 percent during the same period. Most of this diversification to the rural non-farm activities has taken place in sectors such as construction, transport and food processing industries. Retail trade has also contributed to rural workforce diversification. However, despite all these positive reflections, diversification of the female workforce has been limited.

### 3.09. Participation of women in organized sector:

Although a significant proportion of female population of Assam is engaged in the unorganized primary sector, the participation of women in the organised sector is almost double than national average.

**Table 3.09**  
Share of women employment out of total employment in organized sector in Assam (Percent of women)

Year	State/Country	Public Sector	Private Sector	Total
2001	Assam	14.3	47.3	32.0
	India	14.9	24.2	17.8
2004	Assam	14.7	44.7	30.0
	India	15.9	24.8	18.7
2008	Assam	16.2	48.0	32.5
	India	16.5	24.1	19.1

Source: Directorate of Employment and Craftsmen Training, Assam

It has been observed from Table 3.09 that women constitute around 32 percent in all organised sector workers, as opposed to only 19 percent for all India in same sector. However, majority of female workers are engaged in private sector. In fact, almost 48 percent of female workers are engaged in organised private sector in Assam which is more than double to the national average. The percentage of women engaged in public sector in Assam is almost same to the national figure. However, this trend of women's employment is only a 'feel good factor', euphoria for the women of Assam. The reality speaks a different language: the vast majorities of women engaged in the organised private sector are employed by the Tea Industry which is one of the largest organised sectors in Assam, either as permanent or temporary / casual labourers, and are a marginalized section of Assamese society.

An important aspect of quality of female employment in Assam is predominance of the unorganized sector. Over the years, organised sector employment has grown slowly (less than one percent during 2001-08) reflecting the faster growth of employment in the unorganized sector. As a result, there has been increasing informalization of employment over the years. As a whole, about 67 percent of female employment is in the unorganized sector in Assam. In urban areas, the percentage of unorganized sector workers is close to 55-60 percent.

A large proportion of the workers engaged in the urban unorganized sector is migrants from rural areas with poor educational, training and skill background and are employed in low-paying, semi-skilled or unskilled jobs. The productivity and earning levels in most of the enterprises are low and do not often provide full time work to those engaged. For the employees, the working environment is not conducive, working hours are long and most of the conditions of decent employment (e.g. paid leave, pension, bonus, medical support and health insurance, maternity leave benefits, compensation against accident, etc) are nearly non-existent.

As per findings of the 5th Economic Census, out of the 2208169 persons engaged in the unorganized sector, 1442854 persons were in rural establishment and 765315 persons were in urban establishments (Table 3.10).

**Table 3.10**  
**Number of Employment in Establishments**

Sl. No.	Item	Rural	Urban	Combined
<b>1 All Establishments:</b>				
1.1	Total Employment	<b>1442854</b> (44.9)	<b>765315</b> (57.1)	<b>2208169</b> (49.1)
1.1.1.	Female	189006 (70.8)	68019 (82.3)	257025 (73.9)
1.1.2	Children (Male)	24752 (62.4)	8152 (90.8)	32904 (69.4)
1.1.3	Children (Female)	3388 (57.5)	660 (81.1)	4048 (61.3)
<b>1.2 Agricultural Activity</b>		<b>80017</b>	<b>6131</b>	<b>86148</b>
1.2.1	Female	14168	959	15127
1.2.2	Children (Male)	3524	236	3760
1.2.3	Children (Female)	350	8	358
<b>1.3 Non-Agricultural Activity</b>		<b>1362837</b>	<b>759184</b>	<b>2122021</b>
1.3.1	Female	174838	67060	241898
1.3.2	Children (Male)	21228	7916	29144
1.3.3	Children (Female)	3038	652	3960

Source: Fifth Economic Census, Assam, 2005

**Table 3.11**  
**Percentage of Persons Usually Working in Establishment with At least One Hired Worker by**  
**Major Activity in Assam**

Activity	Rural		Urban		Combined	
	Female	Total	Female	Total	Female	Total
Agricultural	2.52	2.80	0.80	0.56	2.00	1.87
Mining & Quarrying	0.28	0.36	0.13	0.08	0.23	0.24
Manufacturing	33.72	26.10	20.54	15.89	29.79	21.85
Electricity, Gas & Water Supply	0.05	0.43	0.22	0.30	0.10	0.38
Construction	0.12	0.72	0.45	1.73	0.22	1.14
Sale, Maintenance & Repair M/V & M/C	0.09	0.91	0.42	3.28	0.19	1.89
Wholesale Trade	0.30	0.80	1.04	4.03	0.52	2.14
Retail Trade	5.77	15.66	8.05	28.17	6.45	20.86
Hotels & Restaurants	3.02	6.00	4.54	7.28	3.48	6.53
Transport & Storage	0.38	2.08	0.76	3.26	0.49	2.57
Posts & Telecommunications	0.46	0.93	2.65	1.87	1.11	1.32
Financial Intermediation	0.35	0.62	2.70	2.27	1.05	1.31
Real Estate, Renting & Business Services	0.62	1.21	1.65	2.88	0.93	1.90
Pub. Admin. & Defenses, Compulsory Social Security	2.56	4.84	14.38	13.75	6.09	8.54
Education	36.79	25.32	28.62	7.68	34.35	17.99
Health & Social Work	10.38	3.75	9.77	3.06	10.20	3.46
Other community, Social & Personal Service activities	2.60	7.47	3.28	3.91	2.80	5.99
Other Activities	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
<b>All (Agricultural &amp; Non-Agricultural)</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>100.00</b>

Source: Fifth Economic Census' 2005, Assam

Out of the total workers, around 45 percent workers were found to be working in the establishments operating in rural areas and 57 percent in the urban areas. While adult female workers account for around 12 percent of the total persons employed, rural adult female workers constitute around 74 percent of the total adult female working force. The adult female participation rate is around 9 percent compared to male worker. The census report also indicated that 36952 (1.67 percent of the total

worker) child workers were also engaged in various establishments out of which 4048 were female.

It is evident from the 5<sup>th</sup> Economic Census results that 49.1 percent of the total workers were engaged as hired workers of which rural/urban divide was 44.9 percent and 57.1 percent respectively. In respect of hired worker pertaining to total adult female and children, this percentage was 73.9 percent and 68.5 percent respectively. It is interesting to note that child labour were engaged both in agricultural and non-agricultural activities. Around 94 percent of total male child labour is engaged in agricultural activities in rural areas which was around 98 percent for females. In non-agricultural activities engagement of male child labour was around 73 percent in rural areas to the total male child labour as against only 27 percent in urban areas. On the other hand, 77 percent of female child labour was engaged in non-agricultural activities to the total female child labour in rural areas in comparison to 16 percent in urban areas. Such phenomenon indicates rural poverty in Assam.

There is evidence that though male child labour is decreasing, female child labour might be on the rise though the inclusion of domestic help and duties in some studies might have inflated such estimates. This is mainly attributed to rising female poverty due to stagnation in agriculture and the marginalization of female workers in manufacturing sectors, both of which are forcing more women and children into the informal sector.

### **3.10. Employment and unemployment position of women:**

Unemployment is a chronic problem almost common to each and every economics of the world. The problem of growing unemployment continues to a matter of great concern for Assam. In spite of having huge natural resources, the state's economy still largely remains backward and underdeveloped as these natural resources have not yet been thoroughly exploited. Against the back-drop of increasing poverty, slow pace of economic development and very high rate of population growth, the unemployment problem among women has assumed chronic and complex character of Assam.

Although the magnitude of unemployment in Assam is not precisely known, we can have an idea about the trend and dimension of the problem from the number of job seekers registered with the employment exchanges as depicted in Table 3.12

Table 3.12:  
Employment position of women as per employment exchange in Assam

Year	Percentage share of women to the total Registration	Percentage share of women to the total placement	Percentage of women without placement
1	2	3	4
2004	27.75	5.53	22.22
2005	29.81	5.41	24.4
2006	31.33	13.43	17.9
2007	30.64	14.07	16.57
2008	30.38	14.33	16.05

Source: Directorate of Employment and Craftsmen Training, Assam

The table given above reveals that the percentage share of female job seekers registered with employment exchanges which were around 28 percent in 2004 increased sharply to around 31 percent in 2006 and marginally fell down to around 30 percent in 2008. The increase in the number of job seekers in 2008 was thus almost 3 percent over 2004. The percentage share of women to the total placement gradually increased by around 9 percent and as a result percentage of women without placement declined slowly by around 6 percent during 2004-08. Nevertheless, almost half of the women registered in employment exchanges are remain without placement. This is an indication of the mass unemployment problem of Assam in recent years. The unemployment statistics reflect only the trend and not the totality of employment and underemployment as all unemployed do not and cannot register themselves with the employment exchanges, which are mostly located in the urban areas.

Besides, there is a huge extent of under-employment or disguised unemployment existing in the rural areas of the state, which is putting a heavy pressure on the rural economy of the state. The enormity of the problem can be appreciated from the fact that nearly 36 percent of the total population of Assam continues to live below the poverty line, a figure quite above the national average of 26 percent. Importantly, the percentage of people living below the poverty line in Assam is highest among the seven states of the North East India. Arguably, poverty has a women's face – out of every ten poorest persons of the world, six are women. It is this said context, it can be said that the women of Assam who bear this brunt of poverty and unemployment.

The employment-unemployment survey conducted by the NSSO in various rounds gives a glimpse on various characteristics of employment and unemployment situation in the country as well as in the states.

Table 3.13

Number of persons employed per 1000 persons according to usual status in Assam.

NSSO	Rural		Urban	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
50 <sup>th</sup> Round (1993-94)	516	161	528	93
55 <sup>th</sup> Round (1999-2000)	506	87	507	97
60 <sup>th</sup> Round (Jan 2004-05)	527	86	528	79
61 <sup>st</sup> Round (July 2004-June 2005)	551	209	551	109
64 <sup>th</sup> Round (July 2007 to June, 2008)	548	289	554	138

Source: National Sample Survey Organisation

It has been observed from Table 3.13 that the percentage of female employment in rural Assam according to usual status was around 16 in NSSO's 50<sup>th</sup> round which was sharply decreased to around 8.6 percent in 60<sup>th</sup> round as the state continues to be marked by low agricultural productivity, poor infrastructure, weak communications and nascent levels of industrial activity during this period. With political normalcy restored since the past few years and improvements in the state's exchequer, investments and developmental interventions have experienced improvements. This may be the possible reason for sharp increase of female employment in rural Assam to around 21 percent of NSSO's 61<sup>st</sup> round and around 29 percent in 64<sup>th</sup> Round. The same phenomenon has been revealed in urban areas where the percentage of female employment per 1000 persons was around 9 in NSSO's 50<sup>th</sup> Round which was decreased to around 7.9 percent in 60<sup>th</sup> round and suddenly jumped to around 14 percent in 64<sup>th</sup> round. Moreover, the rural-urban differentials of number of persons per 1000 persons according to usual status in Assam was almost negligible for males in NSSO's 55<sup>th</sup>, 60<sup>th</sup>, 64<sup>th</sup> round. However, such differentials are significant for females. It was only 68 (or 27 percent) in NSSO's 50<sup>th</sup> round which was sharply increased to 151 (or 35 percent) in NSSO's 64<sup>th</sup> round indicating high degree of unemployment problem in urban areas than rural areas as

majority of rural women employ in farm activities and urban women prefer to engage in household activities or without works due to their higher income effect.

NSSO's 61<sup>st</sup> (2004-05) gives the sectoral composition of the labour market (Table 3.14).

**Table 3.14**  
**Per 1000 distribution of Usually Working Persons in the Principal Status and Subsidiary Status taken together by Broad Industry Division (NIC 1998)**

	Broad Industry Categories									
	Agriculture, etc.	Mining & quarrying	Manufacturing	Electricity, water, etc.	Construction	Trade, hotel & restaurant	Transport, etc.	Other Services		
								Public Administration	Education	Community
NIC-98 divisions	(01 – 05)	(10 – 14)	(15 – 37)	(40 – 41)	(45)	(50 – 55)	(60 – 64)	(65 – 74)	(75 – 99)	(01 – 99)
<b>Rural</b>										
Assam	696	3	29	2	30	116	32	2	88	1000
All-India	665	6	79	2	68	83	38	7	52	1000
<b>Urban</b>										
Assam	883	0	37	0	8	11	2	1	57	1000
All-India	833	3	84	0	15	25	2	1	38	1000

**Source: NSSO 61st Round: 2004-05**

It has been observed from Table 3.14 that the labour force participation in the agricultural sector was highest with about 70 percent followed by 11 percent in Trade, Hotel and Restaurant and 9 percent in Public Administration, Education and Community services in the rural areas of Assam as against about 66 percent in agriculture, 8 percent in Trade, Hotel and Restaurant and 5 percent in Public Administration, Education and Community services at all India level. An overwhelming 88 percent (in urban areas) are engaged in the agro-based industries followed by only 5.7 percent in Public Administration, Education and Community services in urban Assam. A vast potential of Trade, Hotel & Restaurant has been explored by only 1 percent of the workforce. This may call for a large scale occupational mobilization through sectoral shifts from mainly the primary sector to other sectors which have potential for employment growth.

Table 3.15 depicts unemployment rates among males and females in rural and urban areas of Assam.

Table: 3.15  
Unemployment Rates (in percent) for Assam and India

State/Country	Year	Rural		Urban	
		Male	Female	Male	Female
Assam	1995-96	1.9	2.6	5.8	8.4
	2000-01	2.3	2.8	6.2	8.8
	2004-05	2.4	3.1	6.9	9.1
India	1995-96	1.2	1.1	2.8	5.4
	2000-01	1.7	1.9	3.2	6.2
	2004-05	1.6	1.8	3.8	6.9

Source: a) Directorate of Employment and Craftsman Training, Assam  
b) Statistics on Women in India, 2007

As agriculture is the predominant sector in rural areas, therefore, unemployment rate for both males and females in rural areas were less than urban areas during 1995-96 to 2004-05 in Assam as well as in India. The rural-urban differential of female unemployment rates was almost 6 percent in Assam during 1995-96 and was more or less same in 2004-05. However, such rural-urban differential was only 4 percent in 1995-96 and marginally increased to around 5 percent at national level during 2004-05. It indicates that the unemployment rates among urban women was not only more than rural women but also higher than national level. Moreover, the male-female differential of unemployment rates is also significant in Assam in both rural and urban areas. The unemployment rates of rural women which were around 1 percent more than males in Assam in 1995-96 remained same during 2004-05. But for urban women the male-female gap of unemployment rate was around 3 percent in 1995-96 and around 2 percent in 2004-05. In contrast to the urban areas, the male-female gap of rural unemployment rate was almost negligible during 1995-96 to 2004-05. But such male-female gap was almost 3 percent at national level during the same period. The low male-female gap of unemployment rate in rural areas of Assam may be due to rural poverty and existence of child labour. Another crucial issue relates to the sharp increase in urban unemployment for females. Analysis of unemployment data for the year 2004-05 reveals that unemployment rates are very high for females than males. It was around 9 percent for females as against almost 7 percent for males as there is a tendency of

early exit of women (probably after marriage) from labour market particularly in urban areas may be due to inadequate social and family support system.

A clear picture of the worker in different age group level can be seen from the Table 3.16.

**Table 3.16**

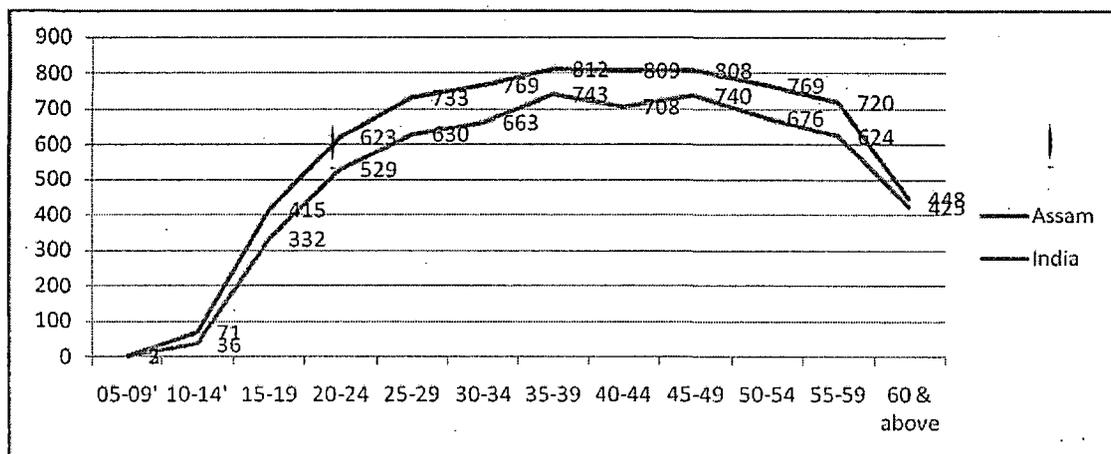
**Age Specific Usual Worker (Principal & Subsidiary status taken together) for Assam and India**

	Age Groups (in years)												
	05-09	10-14	15-19	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-49	50-54	55-59	60 & above	All (0+)
Assam - Rural	2	36	332	529	630	663	743	708	740	676	624	425	391
All-India Rural	3	71	415	623	733	769	812	809	808	769	720	448	439
Assam - Urban	2	17	180	335	442	578	632	654	703	579	557	166	336
All-India - Urban	3	41	241	458	586	633	658	661	638	616	532	228	365

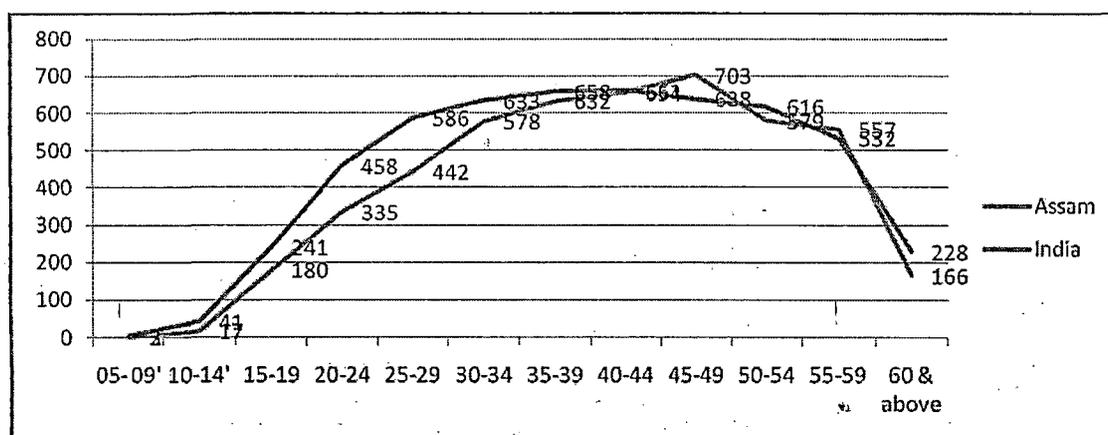
Source: NSSO 61<sup>st</sup> Round: 2004-05

It has been observed from Table 3.16 that the Workers Population Ratio (WPR) of Assam is lower than the national average at all age group level both in rural and urban areas. While at the younger age (below 14) lower WPR is a good sign for Assam, yet about 5 percent of the population in rural areas and about 3 percent in urban areas of the population of the age below 14 years are workers, which indicates existence of child labour in the society.

**Figure 1: Showing trends in age specific workforce participation Assam- India (Rural)**



**Figure 2: Showing trends in age specific workforce participation Assam- India (Urban)**



### 3.11. Mode of Female Employment

The distribution of workers by category of employment i.e., self-employment, casual wage employment and regular salaried, reveals the nature of the employment problem. The proportion of self-employed in the workforce of Assam as well as in India constitutes the single largest share. This section of the workforce does not operate in the labour market for wages or earnings, but earn profits out of their own enterprises. A small proportion of them are exclusively employers, while a large section of them work as owners/employers cum workers. Further, an overwhelming proportion of these self-employed workers are small and petty business holders, including small and marginal farmers, and many a time, their earning levels are as low as those of casual workers. A large section of the self-employed persons resort to casual labour work in order to supplement household income (Bhalla, Karan and Shobha, 2006). Needless to say, the level of earnings of most of the self-employed workers in the organised sector is much higher than those in the unorganized sector.

The most dismal stage of affairs in the female labour market of Assam can be located in the category of casual wage labourers while their work contract is terminated and renewed on a daily basis. Poor working conditions and low wages yield them only poverty. Casual wage labour is not a homogenous group of workers. Urban casual labourers are better placed in comparison to their rural counterparts because of better job opportunities in the urban informal sector. In rural areas, casual workers are engaged largely in agriculture at subsistence wages. The casualisation of

work-force has implication for the status of industrial relations in the state as well as the country and is a direct result of the changing corporate strategies in the era of globalization where firms have adopted employment practices which encourage employment of casual work-force. But what the data show, is the reduction in the percentage share of casual female workers during post-reform period. (1993-94 to 2004-05)

Table 3.17

## Mode of Employment of Usual Status Female Workers in Assam &amp; India (percent)

Mode of Employment	India Rural		Assam Rural		India Urban		Assam Urban	
	1993-94	2004-05	1993-94	2004-05	1993-94	2004-05	1993-94	2004-05
Self-employed	19.2	20.8	7.8	14.7	6.9	7.9	2.6	2.9
Regular	0.9	1.2	2.9	1.8	4.5	5.9	4.6	5.9
Casual	12.7	10.6	5.2	4.5	4.1	2.8	2.0	2.1
Total WPR	32.8	32.6	15.9	20.9	15.5	16.6	9.2	10.9
Index of casualisation	1411	883	179	250	91	47	43	33

**Source:** Calculated from the Report No. 409 of 50<sup>th</sup> Round and 515 of 61<sup>st</sup> Round of NSS

*\*Note: Index of casualisation shows the number of casual wage earners for every one-hundred of regular salaried jobs.*

$$\text{Index of casualisation} = \frac{\text{Casual Workers}}{100 \text{ Regular Workers}} \times 100$$

Table 3.17 shows the changing mode of female employment during 1993-94 to 2004-05. It is at once clear that in both the areas of Assam and India, the percentage of self-employed and regular employed increased in post-reform period except around 1 percent decrease of regular employed in rural Assam. For self-employed, it increased by around 2 percent at rural level and around 1 percent at urban level in India during 1993-94 to 2004-05 as against around 7 percent increase in rural Assam and around 1 percent increase in urban Assam. In fact, the rate of increase in urban Assam is almost similar to the national level. But the rate of increase of self employed in rural Assam was 5 percent more than national level during 1993-94 to 2004-05. The increase in percentage of regular female workers is higher in urban areas both in Assam and India. In urban Assam and India the regular employed workers were increased by almost 1 percent during 1993-94 to 2004-05 as against around 1 percent decrease in rural Assam and negligible increase in rural India.

The index of casualisation shows the number of casual wage earners for every one hundred of regular salaried employees. It is explicit from the Table 3.17 that over the period, casualisation of female workers declined in India but at rural level the incidence of casualisation is much higher to urban areas. But most dismal state of affairs in the female labour market is that the index of casualisation in the rural areas of Assam increased by around 16 percent during 1993-94 to 2004-05 as against 13 percent decrease in urban Assam during the same period. The marked rural-urban difference in terms of percentage of female workers engaged as casual wage earners at once clear a large number of disadvantages like low wage rates, uncertain employment, and irregularity of rural female workers.

Among these three broad segments of the labour market, regular job markets particularly in the organised sector, have strong and strict entry barriers based on various pre-qualifications of the labour-force. In contrast, a large proportion of the self-employed and casual work-force keeps oscillating between the two, depending on the job availability in these two markets. In casual worker category, the percentage of female workers in Assam declined from 5.2 percent in 1993-94 to 4.5 percent in 2004-05 at rural level and remained stagnant around 2 percent at urban level for the said period.

Self-employment is relatively predominant form of employment, accounting for more than half of the female workforce, while only 10 per cent of the working women have regular salaried employment (NSSO, 2007). Further, self-employment provides an opportunity to express one's creative instincts, initiative, and innovative capabilities, and is therefore a potentially more productive form of employment. This form of employment has, thus, a greater impact on women's empowerment.

Data show that the extent of casualisation of female workers in both the rural and urban areas declined during 1993-94 to 2004-05. In rural areas, female workers are shifting mainly to be self employed and in urban India towards regular employment. It can be argued that the current system of subcontracting of work in the urban economy is such that the female workers are no longer reported in the self employed category. They are getting work-whatever may be the wage rate-on a more regular basis.

### 3.12. Educated Unemployment:

The most alarming feature of the state is the growing unemployment problem. The job-seekers specially educated job-seekers are increasing day by day as depicted in Table 3.13. From the record of the Live Register of Employment Exchanges, the registered educated job seekers stood at 1520310 during 2009, recorded an increase of 13 per cent over 2008. The percentage of educated job seekers to total job seekers was 73 percent approximately, and out of the educated job seekers 46 percent was H.S.L.C. passed, 30 percent was H.S.S.L.C. passed, 2 percent was Graduate and the rest consist of Technical Graduate (Engineering, Medical, Agriculture and Veterinary etc.) and Post-Graduate job seekers. The registration of job seekers in the Live Register of Employment Exchanges in 2008 has increased by 11.61 per cent over the previous year which is a matter of concern in the context of socio-economic profile of the state. The detail distribution of the educated job seekers is shown in Table-3.18.

**Table 3.18**  
**Distribution of Educated Job-Seekers**

	Level of Education	Registration		Percentage increase in Registration	Placement		Numbers in live register	
		2008	2009		2008	2009	2008	2009
1	Engineering Graduate	237	271	14.35	27	18	2978	3007
2	Medical Graduate	159	165	3.77	19	6	617	721
3	Agriculture Graduate	175	186	6.29	17	10	1127	1231
4	Veterinary Graduate	63	69	9.52	10	7	492	543
5	Passed out ITI Trainees	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
	a) Engineering Trade	1011	1317	30.46	35	60	17132	17233
	b) Non-Engineering Trade	623	751	20.55	21	10	4015	4090
6	Post Graduate	4287	4780	11.50	43	29	23293	24946
7	Graduates	22493	28598	27.14	52	148	231529	299402
8	H.S.S.L.C.	38121	39999	4.93	45	109	392558	452537
9	H.S.L.C.	66157	78005	17.91	82	64	667329	700518
10	Diploma Holders (Eng.)	283	293	3.53	23	25	6012	11609
11	Others	492	563	14.43	59	15	4429	4473
	Total	134101	154999	15.58	4333	501	1351511	1520310

Source: Directorate of Employment and Craftsmen Training, Assam

The distribution of job-seekers according to their skill level shows that a vast majority of the unemployed youths who have registered their names in the Employment Exchanges (about 80 percent) are unskilled. The placement opportunity of this group is also negligible. The status of job-seekers registered with the Employment Exchange has been depicted in Table 3.19.

**Table 3.19**

**Distribution of Educated Job Seekers as per the Live Register of Employment Exchange**

Skilled/ unskilled	Registration		Percentage increase/ decrease in registration	Placement		Numbers in live register	
	2007	2008		2007	2008	2007	2008
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Skilled job-seekers	24908	29823	19.7 Inc.	208	306	272678	291624
Unskilled job-seekers	95246	104278	9.5 Inc.	91	127	1026688	1059887
<b>Total</b>	<b>120154</b>	<b>134101</b>	<b>11.6 Inc.</b>	<b>299</b>	<b>433</b>	<b>1299366</b>	<b>1351511</b>

*Source: Employment Exchange, Assam 2007-08*

It has been observed from Table 3.19 that the overwhelming majority of the workforce does not possess any identifiable marketable skills. Most of the job seekers (about 80 percent) in Employment Exchanges are without any professional skills, indicating low level of skill development in Assam.

**Table 3.20**

**Job Seekers Registered With Employment Exchanges in India (by sex)**

Area	No. of live register as at the end of the year								
	2004			2005			2006		
	Male	Female	Person	Male	Female	Person	Male	Female	Person
Assam	1289.0	343.0	1632.0	1364.9	395.9	1760.8	1420.1	423.1	1843.2
India	29746.1	10711.6	40457.7	28742.2	10605.6	39347.8	29885.0	11731.0	41616.0

*Source: Selected Socio-Economic Statistics India, 2008*

It has been observed from Table 3.20 that female job seekers registered with Employment Exchanges was around 21 percent as against 79 percent of males in 2004. It increased to 23 percent for females in 2006 as against decrease of male job seekers to 77 percent during the same period. This shows that the percentage of

female job seekers registered with Employment Exchanges was far lower than males, although almost half of the total population is female.

It may however be mentioned here that Employment Exchange's data no doubt provide an idea about the dimension of the problem but it has got some limitations so far as the coverage of total unemployed persons of the State is concerned. It is a fact that all unemployed persons of the State are not registered with the Employment Exchanges due to various reasons. On the other hand, all persons registered with the Employment Exchanges also cannot be said to be totally unemployed since some of them might already be self-employed or partially employed while some other might have registered seeking higher status employment from the existing low status employment.

### 3.13. Census of Assam Government Employees:

As per the Assam Government Employees census, the total number of employees stood at 3.24 lakh as on 31<sup>st</sup> March, 2004 as against 3.24 lakh as on 31<sup>st</sup> March, 1999. Thus, the number of employees has recorded a decrease of (-)0.61 percent during the period from 01.02.99 to 31.03.04. Table 3.21 shows the distribution of Government Employees according to sex as per Employees census, 2004.

**Table 3.21**  
**Distribution of Assam Government Employees according to sex as per Employees census,**  
**1999 & 2004**

Status	Male		Female	
	1999	2004	1999	2004
Class I	7621	8078	842	1177
Class II	8119	7313	1106	868
Class III	199748	195038	50310	48242
Class IV	54067	47079	4258	3534
Fixed/Consolidated	---	7416	---	5433
<b>Total</b>	<b>269555</b>	<b>264924</b>	<b>56516</b>	<b>59254</b>

Source: Directorate of Economic & Statistics, Assam

It has been observed from Table 3.21 that the female employees accounted for about 17 percent in 1999 which was marginally increased to around 18 percent in 2004. In contrast to this, male employees accounted for about 83 percent in 1999 and marginally decreased to 82 percent in 2004. But only 2 percent of female employees were Class-I employees as against around 3 percent of males to their respective total employees in 2004. Further 81 percent of female employees were Class-III and 9 percent with fixed/consolidated pay to their total employment in 2004 as against 74 percent and 3 percent of males in the said category. It indicates that females in Government job are mainly employed in less prestigious and low paid job than males.

### 3.14. Average Daily Wage Rate in Rural Areas:

As per data collected by the Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Assam, the Average Daily Wage Rate of Workers (Carpenters, black-smith, field-labour, herdsman and other agricultural labour) shows a more or less steady upward trend.

**TABLE -3.22**  
**Average Daily Wage Rate in Rural Areas in Assam (in Rupees)**

Year	Skilled Labour Wage		Un-skilled Labour Wage				Other Agricultural Labour	
	Carpenter	Blacksmith	Field Labour Ploughman	Herdsman	Reaper and Harvester		Man	Women
	Man	Man	Man	Man	Man	Women		
2001-02	87.01	62.17	52.01	37.56	50.71	40.73	47.02	42.16
2002-03	92.93	68.02	52.32	48.53	52.05	46.50	49.21	47.47
2003-04	102.4	85.11	57.53	52.05	60.13	42.18	55.40	49.32
2004-05	108.77	88.25	62.05	54.85	63.90	49.18	59.27	48.52
2005-06	113.91	94.45	64.19	63.01	65.02	49.02	61.44	47.69
2006-07	120.80	100.69	71.02	63.07	68.09	52.61	65.46	53.88
2007-08	123.53	97.29	76.44	72.19	74.27	59.53	72.11	58.04
2008-09	133.89	104.64	84.65	82.72	82.55	66.76	83.47	66.60
2009-10	147.08	121.33	92.91	92.08	93.25	74.05	102.83	87.00

**Source:** Directorate of Economic & Statistics, Assam

It has been observed from Table 3.22 that there are significant differences of average daily wage rate between men and women particularly among unskilled labourers and other agricultural labourers. The man-women gap of average daily wage rate in rural areas of Assam was around Rs.10 among reaper and harvesters in

2001-02 which was rapidly widened to Rs.19 in 2009-10. Further man-women gap of average daily wage rate among other agricultural labourers was around Rs.5 in 2001-02 and it was rapidly widened to almost Rs.16 in 2009-10. It indicates that women are paid less than man for the same agricultural work which may be one of the important reasons for rural poverty.

Casual wage labourers are one of the most disadvantaged groups in the labour market, while their work contract is terminated and renewed on a daily basis, poor working conditions and low wages push them below poverty line.

**Table 3.23**

**Average Daily Wage (in Rs.) of Regular and Casual Workers in Assam (15-59 Years), 2004-05**

	Male	Female	Index of gender bias in wage payments
<b>Regular</b>			
Rural	123.17	97.70	0.79
Urban	181.52	155.36	0.91
<b>Casual</b>			
Rural	58.03	35.94	0.61
Urban	76.1	44.88	0.58

**Note:** Index of gender bias in wage payments has been calculated as the ratio of female wage to male wage. Smaller ratio indicates high gender bias

**Source:** Calculated from unit level data of NSSO, 2004-05

In 2004-05, average casual wage for males and females was just Rs.58 and 36 respectively in rural areas and Rs.76 and 45 respectively in urban areas. On an average in 2004-05, casual workers received far less wages than those received by regular workers. (Table 3.23)

In addition to low wages for casual workers, there is also gender bias in wage payments. It is important to note that the gender bias in casual wage payments is low in rural areas (0.61) than in urban areas (0.58). However, the reason for low gender bias in wage payments in rural areas is highly suppressed wages both for male and female rural workers. The gender bias is also noticeable in case of urban regular workers.

Rural casual labour constitutes the single largest segment of the total workforce in Assam. Among rural casual labourers, agricultural labourers occupy a

predominant position. The rural agricultural wage rate, hence, is considered as one of the most robust indicators of economic well-being not only of agricultural labourers but also of the over all rural population (Deaton & Dreze, 2002). However, agricultural wages are persistently lower than non-agricultural wages.

Among the various reasons for higher rise in rural wages of non-agricultural activities, are enhanced labour productivity and policy intervention through employment generation programmes. In contrast, the agriculture sector continues to be overcrowded, leading to low labour productivity. All these have led to a lower growth in real wages in agriculture over the years.

### **Conclusion:**

The female work participation rate of Assam is less than half of the male participation which is almost half of the male participation rate of India in 2001. It indicates that the work participation rate of female in Assam is less than national average. The female work participation rate of Barpeta District is almost 6 percent lower than average figure of Assam in 2001. Moreover, the female work participation rate of India increased by almost 3 percent as against 1 percent decrease in Assam during 1991-2001. Although the FWPR of Barpeta District increased by almost 3 percent during 1991-2001, it is much less than average figure of Assam. Various reasons may be indicated for such low work participation of females. Generally women are not allowed to work outside because of certain age-old prejudices. Factors like increase in family income and underestimation of various household work performed by female may also responsible for such low FWPR. There is not only low FWPR in Assam, but also there are rural-urban differentials. Although female literacy rate of Assam was almost 2 percent higher than national level (2011 Provisional Census), yet FWPR was less than national level in both rural and urban areas. The FWPR in rural and urban areas of Barpeta District was almost 47 percent in 1991 and 2001 although female literacy increased during this period. It indicates that women's education has not played effective transformative role in increasing their labour force participation. It also indicates that beside education, many other like social mind set up, social norms and customs which can not be measured accurately, affects the female work participation rate. High rural-urban differential in FWPR may be due to the fact that the nature of rural works largely agriculture, is such where females can also participate particularly in low-skilled and low paid jobs. In urban areas, however,

there is either full-time job or no jobs. Again, female of the category of housewives constitute a large proportion of the female residing in urban areas. Early exit of women (probably post marital age) from labour market may be another reason for low FWPR in urban areas where women face inadequate social and family support system. Moreover, there are also high male-female differentials of WPR in both rural and urban areas of Assam. Women are generally engaged in household activities such as bearing and rearing of children and in the production of goods and services for self-household consumption. Therefore, women's work at home remains unrecognized unless it produces something for sale. Therefore, the work participation for female is a myth rather than reality. In recent census, women considered as worker who make significant contribution in the agricultural operations like sowing, harvesting, transplantation, tending cattle and even cooking and delivering food to the farm during the agricultural operation. Therefore, male-female gap of WPR in rural areas has been lower than urban areas. However, in urban areas, women do not have any opportunities for such work as well as inherit gender-bias in rural-urban definition in census of India. According to Indian census, a place is defined as urban if it satisfied that 75 percent of its male workers are engaged in non-agriculture sector. Therefore, the gap of work force participation rate will be much more for male than female in urban areas. Even though, women are engaged in productive household activities with no direct financial gain to the household. The analysis of Age-Specific WPR has shown that the highest increase in FWPR in rural areas took place in the age group of 30-44 years (around 4 percent) during 1993-94 to 2004-05 as against highest increase in urban Assam in the age group 45-59 years i.e. 1.5 percent. Thus, higher aged persons are entering in the female labour market in recent times. This may be due to impact of inflation or social cause like breaking up of joint families into nuclear ones'. Further, the ESWPR in Assam increased by 13.9 percentage points and remained almost stagnant at all India level during 1993-94 to 2004-05. The possible reasons may be that 87 percent of Assam population lives in rural areas. Literacy rate and education level is poor in rural areas. For illiterate women it is easy to enter in primary sector. On the other side women with higher education prefer to do job/work and earn rather to sit ideally.

Census data of work participation rate of main and marginal workers has shown that the percentage of both male and female main workers decreased in Assam during the period 1991-2001. But there were huge male-female gap of main workers.

It was almost 30 percent in 1991 which was marginally declined to 29 percent in 2001. It indicates that males were engaged in more assured productive activities than females. Region wise, the percentage of female main workers to the total female population were lower in industrially backward Lower Assam and Barpeta District of Assam in comparison to average figure of Assam in 1991 and 2001. However, the percentage of female main workers to the total female population were higher in Central and Upper Assam in comparison to the average figure of Assam in 1991 and 2001 as because these regions are industrially advanced (particularly by tea industries) in comparison to Lower Assam.

As men migrate in search of better paid work, women particularly in rural areas are taking over agricultural work in the villages. They face meager wages, long working hours and hazardous work. Figures from the census show that, amongst women, the percentage of "marginal workers" (defined as working for less than 183 days per year) has increased significantly in Assam from about 9 percent in 1991 to about 11 percent in 2001. During the same period, there was a sharp fall in the percentage of "main workers" (more than 183 days a year). The figures thus show a casualisation and feminization of the work force, with the number of marginal women workers becoming larger and more significant. Region wise, the percentage of female marginal workers in Central Assam was highest, although it was remain stagnant at around 13 percent over the period 1991-2001. During the same period, there was a sharp rise in the percentage of female marginal workers by around 6 percent in Upper Assam, and only 2 percent in Lower Assam and Barpeta District. In fact, the percentage of female marginal workers in Upper and Central Assam was more than average figure of Assam in both 1991 and 2001. It indicates not only significant regional variation of female marginal workers, but also possibility of higher incidence of unemployment among females. As marginal work is uncertain and related to irregular income, the significant percent of female marginal workers also indicate poverty and inequality.

Data relating to age group wise labour by sex has shown that higher percentage of female main workers were in the age group 5-14 years than males in both Assam and India indicating more child labour among females than males. Similarly, significant percent of female main workers in the age group above 60 in both Assam and India indicates poverty where aged people are compelled to work due to economic necessity.

Census data of occupational structure has shown that the percentage of female main workers engaged in primary sector was almost 91 percent in 1991 and 60 percent in 2001 in rural Assam. The corresponding figures of males were almost 79 percent in 1991 and around 58 per cent in 2001. Thus, primary occupation singularly provides employment to majority of main workers, though their proportion has been declining. It suggests that there is gradual shift of workers from agricultural to non-agricultural occupations. But it is discouraging to note that the percentage of female main workers engaged in the primary occupations were higher than males. As agriculture provides seasonal employment during cropping season so chances of hidden employment are big. It also indicates that secondary and tertiary sector have failed to generate enough employment opportunities making a pressure on primary sector. Although the percentage of female main workers engaged in primary sector was almost 4 percent lower in rural areas of Barpeta District than average figure of Assam in 1991, it was almost 12 percent higher in 2001. Moreover, the male-female gap of main workers engaged in primary sector increased to almost 7 percent in 2001 as against 6 percent in 1991. Although educated and skill workforce do get employed in secondary and tertiary sector but for unskilled and semi-skilled workers have no alternatives rather than to depend upon primary sector. This fact inhibits the adoption of agricultural innovation in Barpeta District. Although transplanting and harvesting is mainly done by female workers, yet they are not allowed to participate in ploughing and some other selected farm activities. This may be the possible reason for higher proportion of male main workers engaged as cultivators than females in Assam and Barpeta District. Further, majority of females are still denied for land title, though few instances are found for transfer of land ownership to females with a view to escape the land ceiling laws. This may be one of the important reasons for increase in the percentage of female agricultural labourers in Assam during 1991-2001.

An important aspect of quality of female employment in Assam is predominance of the unorganized sector. Over the years, organised sector employment has grown slowly (less than one percent during 2001-08) reflecting the faster growth of employment in the unorganized sector. As a result, there has been increasing informalization of employment over the years. As a whole, about 67 percent of female employment is in the unorganized sector in Assam. In urban areas, the percentage of unorganized sector workers is close to 55-60 percent.

A large proportion of the workers engaged in the urban unorganized sector is migrants from rural areas with poor educational, training and skill background and are employed in low-paying, semi-skilled or unskilled jobs. The productivity and earning levels in most of the enterprises are low and do not often provide full time work to those engaged. For the employees, the working environment is not conducive, working hours are long and most of the conditions of decent employment (e.g. paid leave, pension, bonus, medical support and health insurance, maternity leave benefits, compensation against accident, etc) are nearly non-existent.

Although the magnitude of unemployment in Assam is not precisely known, we can have an idea about the trend and dimension of the problem from the number of job seekers registered with the employment exchanges. The percentage share of women to the total placement gradually increased by around 9 percent and as a result percentage of women without placement declined slowly by around 6 percent during 2004-08. Nevertheless, almost half of the women registered in employment exchanges are remain without placement. This is an indication of the mass unemployment problem of Assam in recent years. The unemployment statistics reflect only the trend and not the totality of employment and underemployment as all unemployed do not and cannot register themselves with the employment exchanges, which are mostly located in the urban areas.

Besides, there is a huge extent of under-employment or disguised unemployment existing in the rural areas of the state, which is putting a heavy pressure on the rural economy of the state. The enormity of the problem can be appreciated from the fact that nearly 36 percent of the total population of Assam continues to live below the poverty line, a figure quite above the national average of 26 percent.

The employment-unemployment survey conducted by the NSSO in various rounds gives a glimpse on various characteristics of employment and unemployment situation in the country as well as in the states. The percentage of female employment in rural Assam according to usual status was around 16 in NSSO's 50<sup>th</sup> round which was sharply decreased to around 8.6 percent in 60<sup>th</sup> round as the state continues to be marked by low agricultural productivity, poor infrastructure, weak communications and nascent levels of industrial activity during this period. With political normalcy restored since the past few years and improvements in the state's exchequer, investments and developmental interventions have experienced

improvements. This may be the possible reason for sharp increase of female employment in rural Assam to around 21 percent of NSSO's 61<sup>st</sup> round and around 29 percent in 64<sup>th</sup> Round.

As agriculture is the predominant sector in rural areas, therefore, unemployment rate for both males and females in rural areas were less than urban areas during 1995-96 to 2004-05 in Assam as well as in India. The rural-urban differential of female unemployment rates was almost 6 percent in Assam during 1995-96 and was more or less same in 2004-05. However, such rural-urban differential was only 4 percent in 1995-96 and marginally increased to around 5 percent at national level during 2004-05. It indicates that the unemployment rates among urban women was not only more than rural women but also higher than national level. The possible reason may be that there is a tendency of early exit of women (probably after marriage) from labour market particularly in urban areas due to inadequate social and family support system.

Moreover, the Workers Population Ratio (WPR) of Assam is lower than the national average at all age group level both in rural and urban areas. While at the younger age (below 14) lower WPR is a good sign for Assam, yet about 5 percent of the population in rural areas and about 3 percent in urban areas of the population of the age below 14 years are workers, which indicates existence of child labour in the society.

The most dismal stage of affairs in the female labour market of Assam can be located in the category of casual wage labourers while their work contract is terminated and renewed on a daily basis. Poor working conditions and low wages yield them only poverty. The index of casualisation in the rural areas of Assam increased by around 16 percent during 1993-94 to 2004-05 as against 13 percent decrease in urban Assam during the same period. The marked rural-urban difference in terms of percentage of female workers engaged as casual wage earners at once clear a large number of disadvantages like low wage rates, uncertain employment, and irregularity of rural female workers. In 2004-05, average casual wage for males and females was just Rs.58 and 36 respectively in rural areas and Rs.76 and 45 respectively in urban areas. In addition to low wages for casual workers, there is also gender bias in wage payments. It is important to note that the gender bias in casual wage payments is low in rural areas (0.61) than in urban areas (0.58).