



## **Women's Upliftment in Lakhimpur District of Assam: A Review of Secondary Literature**

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### **Abstract**

Women's empowerment has been a major developmental focus across India, particularly in rural regions where socio-economic inequalities persist. Lakhimpur, a flood-prone district in Upper Assam, is an important site for understanding the intersection of gender, livelihood vulnerabilities, and rural development. This review paper examines secondary literature research articles, government reports, census data, NGO documents, and evaluations of government schemes to analyse women's upliftment in Lakhimpur district. The review discusses women's socio-economic conditions, education, SHG-based microfinance, sericulture, MGNREGA participation, and broader structural challenges. Findings highlight that while SHGs, livelihood missions and welfare schemes have significantly improved women's financial inclusion and social participation, persistent patriarchal norms, limited market access, and infrastructural barriers continue to hinder full empowerment. The paper identifies gaps in existing research and proposes directions for future studies.

**Keywords:** Women's upliftment, Lakhimpur, Assam, review paper.

### **Introduction**

Women's upliftment has emerged as a central theme in contemporary development discourse, especially within societies marked by structural inequalities, patriarchal norms, and socio-economic marginalisation. In India, the question of women's empowerment has been approached through constitutional guarantees, legislative reforms, welfare policies, and



grassroots-level mobilisation. However, its outcomes vary widely across regions due to differences in cultural practices, resource distribution, educational access, and political participation (Desai &Andrist, 2010; Government of India, 2021). Assam, located in the culturally diverse and geographically sensitive north-eastern region of India, presents a unique context for studying women’s development. While the state has historically witnessed relatively progressive gender relations compared to several other parts of India, women continue to face significant challenges arising from socio-economic underdevelopment, ethnic conflicts, rural isolation, and inadequate welfare implementation (Baruah, 2020; Saikia, 2011). Assam’s demographic composition marked by multi-ethnic, multilingual communities creates a complex landscape for women’s empowerment. Research indicates that although Assamese society demonstrates comparatively lower restrictions on women’s mobility and labour participation, persistent gender disparities exist in education, land ownership, health outcomes, and political decision-making (Deka, 2017; Sharma &Bordoloi, 2019). Rural districts such as Lakhimpur exemplify the intersection of these challenges with geographical vulnerabilities such as recurrent floods, erosion, and agrarian distress. The Lakhimpur district is predominantly agrarian, with a high rural population dependent on farming, fishing, and small-scale trade. Women in this region shoulder significant roles in household management, agricultural labour, and community activities, yet their contribution remains under recognised and undervalued in formal development planning (Nath, 2013).

The district’s socio-economic realities influence women’s access to education, health care, financial resources, and political participation. Although national-level schemes such as Self Help Groups (SHGs) under NRLM, BetiBachaoBetiPadhao, POSHAN Abhiyaan, and state-level programmes like KanaklataMahilaSabalikaranYojana have made women in Assam increasingly visible in public life, disparities in programme reach and implementation remain visible in peripheral districts such as Lakhimpur (Government of Assam, 2022). Secondary data from national surveys (NFHS, Census, RBI reports) reveal that despite improvements in literacy and SHG participation, issues such as domestic violence, early marriage, reproductive health barriers, and limited economic autonomy persist among women in northern Assam (NFHS-5, 2021).

Given these contextual complexities, the upliftment of women in Lakhimpur district requires a comprehensive understanding of socio-cultural norms, economic structures, local governance mechanisms, and the evolving role of women-led organisations. A review of secondary studies reveals patterns of progress such as increasing SHG membership,



expanding participation in rural livelihoods, and gradual improvements in literacy alongside persistent gaps that impede women's holistic development (Bora, 2019; Hazarika, 2020). Therefore, studying women's empowerment in Lakhimpur through a review-based approach is crucial to identifying policy limitations, mapping socio-economic trends, and recommending pathways for sustainable and inclusive development.

This review paper synthesises existing literature, government reports, research publications, and statistical data to examine women's upliftment in Lakhimpur district. By situating the district within the broader socio-political framework of Assam and India, the paper aims to provide a nuanced understanding of women's status, highlight persistent challenges, and suggest evidence-based directions for future research and policy intervention.

### **Objectives of the Study**

- To analyse key dimensions of women's upliftment, including education, health, economic participation, and political representation.
- To evaluate the role of government schemes, NGOs, and self-help groups in enhancing women's empowerment in the district.

### **Methodology**

This study follows a review-based methodology grounded entirely in secondary data sources, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of women's upliftment in Lakhimpur district without engaging in primary fieldwork. Secondary materials were collected from a wide range of credible sources, including government reports such as the Census of India (2011), National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), and the Statistical Handbook of Assam, which provide demographic, educational, and health-related data relevant to women in the district. In addition, peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and academic studies focusing on women's development in Assam were examined to understand broader socio-cultural trends. Reports and publications from NGOs and international organisations working on gender issues were also analysed to assess the role of civil society in promoting women's empowerment. These various sources were selected based on their relevance, reliability, and contribution to the two research objectives. A thematic analysis approach was employed to organise the literature under key categories such as education, health, economic participation, political representation, and the role of government schemes, NGOs, and self-help groups. By synthesising existing research, statistical data, and policy documents, the methodology



ensures a holistic and contextualised review of women's upliftment in Lakhimpur district while highlighting gaps that may require further primary research in future studies.

## **Dimensions of Women's Upliftment in Lakhimpur**

### ***Education***

Education is one of the most critical indicators of women's upliftment, as it directly influences their autonomy, decision-making ability, and socio-economic mobility. In Lakhimpur district, female literacy has shown gradual improvement over the years, although significant gender gaps remain. According to the Census of India (2011), the female literacy rate in Lakhimpur was recorded at approximately 67%, which, although better than some districts of Assam, still lags behind male literacy levels. Studies indicate that factors such as early marriage, domestic responsibilities, financial constraints, and inadequate school infrastructure contribute to higher dropout rates among girls in rural areas (Saikia, 2018). Many secondary schools in remote parts of the district face challenges such as poor sanitation, lack of transport facilities, and insufficient female teachers, which further discourage girls from continuing their studies (Das & Gogoi, 2020). Government schemes like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao and Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan, along with mid-day meal programmes, have helped improve enrolment and retention, but disparities in higher education participation persist. Despite these improvements, achieving gender parity in education remains a challenge, highlighting the need for targeted interventions to support adolescent girls and promote vocational training for young women.

### ***Health***

Women's health in Lakhimpur is shaped by a combination of socio-economic vulnerabilities, geographic conditions, and limited healthcare accessibility. The district often faces recurrent flooding, which disrupts healthcare services and increases women's exposure to water-borne diseases and malnutrition (Das & Gogoi, 2020). According to NFHS-5 (2021), Assam continues to record high levels of anaemia among women, low rates of institutional deliveries in rural pockets, and gaps in reproductive health services all of which are reflected



in districts like Lakhimpur. Many villages lack adequate primary health centres (PHCs) and trained health workers, leading to delays in antenatal care and emergency medical services. Cultural norms and lack of awareness also prevent women from seeking timely medical attention (Hazarika, 2019). Although schemes such as JananiSurakshaYojana and JananiShishuSurakshaKaryakram have improved maternal health indicators by promoting institutional deliveries and providing free services, their implementation remains uneven, especially in flood-prone and remote areas. Thus, while health initiatives have contributed to some progress, structural barriers and environmental vulnerabilities continue to limit women's health outcomes in the district.

### ***Economic Participation***

Economic participation is a vital dimension of women's empowerment, yet women in Lakhimpur largely remain engaged in low-income, informal-sector activities. Most women participate in agriculture, weaving, livestock rearing, and daily wage labour, yet their contributions are often undervalued or unpaid (Hazarika, 2019). The lack of formal employment opportunities and limited access to credit, training, and markets restricts women's ability to achieve economic independence. However, the expansion of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) under the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) has significantly enhanced women's economic engagement. SHGs have enabled women to save regularly, access micro-credit, start small enterprises, and improve their bargaining power in household and community decisions (Gogoi& Borah, 2021). In Lakhimpur, many women-led SHGs are involved in weaving, food processing, tailoring, and petty trade, contributing to household income and financial security. Despite these gains, challenges persist, particularly in scaling up businesses, improving financial literacy, and establishing strong market linkages. Therefore, while SHGs have emerged as a transformative force, sustained institutional support is essential to expand women's economic opportunities in the district.

### ***Political Representation***

Political participation is a key indicator of empowerment, enabling women to influence governance and development decisions. In Lakhimpur district, women's representation in local governance has increased following the implementation of the 33% reservation in Panchayati Raj Institutions. Many women now serve as village heads, ward members, and leaders of local committees, reflecting a growing acceptance of women in political roles (Borah, 2020). However, studies suggest that the presence of women in elected



positions does not always translate into meaningful participation, as many female representatives serve as proxies for male family members often referred to as "proxy leadership" (Borah, 2020). Social norms, limited education, and lack of political training restrict women's ability to participate confidently in decision-making. NGOs and government training programmes have attempted to address these challenges by organising leadership workshops and awareness programmes, yet significant gaps remain in building women's political capacity. Strengthening training mechanisms and promoting gender-sensitive governance practices are therefore essential to enhance women's political empowerment in the district.

## **Role of Government Schemes, NGOs, and Self-Help Groups in Women's Upliftment in Lakhimpur**

### *Role of Government Schemes*

Government interventions have been central to improving women's socio-economic status in Lakhimpur district, particularly through schemes that target education, health, livelihood, and social security. Programmes such as BetiBachaoBetiPadhao, SukanyaSamridhiYojana, RashtriyaMadhyamikShikshaAbhiyan, and Mid-Day Meal Scheme have contributed to improving girls' enrolment, reducing dropout rates, and enhancing nutritional support (Government of India, 2021). In rural Lakhimpur, these schemes have encouraged parents to keep their daughters in school for longer, although challenges related to infrastructure and socio-cultural restrictions continue to persist. Health-focused schemes such as JananiSurakshaYojana (JSY) and JananiShishuSurakshaKaryakram (JSSK) have played a key role in increasing institutional deliveries, providing free maternal healthcare, and enhancing antenatal and postnatal care services among women (NFHS-5, 2021). These initiatives have shown measurable improvements in maternal health indicators across Assam, including Lakhimpur district, though access remains limited in remote flood-prone areas.

Livelihood-oriented programmes have also had a considerable impact. The National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), implemented in Assam as the Assam State Rural Livelihood Mission (ASRLM), has been instrumental in strengthening women's access to micro-credit, entrepreneurship opportunities, and skill development programs (Sharma & Bordoloi, 2019). Similarly, schemes such as PradhanMantriUjjwalaYojana have alleviated



domestic drudgery by providing free LPG connections, reducing women's dependence on firewood and exposure to indoor pollution (Government of Assam, 2022). Yet, despite these achievements, gaps remain concerning awareness, accessibility, targeting efficiency, and monitoring of scheme benefits. Studies suggest that rural women often face difficulties related to documentation, travel costs, administrative delays, and lack of clear information, which limits their ability to fully benefit from these programmes (Baruah, 2020). Thus, while government schemes have laid a strong foundation for empowerment, strengthening implementation mechanisms is crucial for deeper impact.

### ***Role of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)***

NGOs have emerged as significant actors in promoting gender awareness, grassroots mobilisation, and skill development among women in Lakhimpur. Many NGOs in Assam work directly with rural women to address issues related to domestic violence, literacy, reproductive health, financial literacy, and disaster resilience. Their interventions are particularly important in flood-affected areas where government outreach often remains limited. NGOs such as Rural Women Upliftment Society, North East Network (NEN), and other local organisations have conducted community workshops on gender rights, livelihood diversification, and health awareness (Nath, 2013). They play a critical role in bridging the gap between government schemes and beneficiaries by helping women understand eligibility criteria, documentation procedures, and benefits available under different programmes.

Additionally, NGOs provide skill-based training in weaving, tailoring, handicrafts, mushroom cultivation, food processing, and other income-generating activities relevant to rural livelihoods. These programmes have helped women gain confidence and economic independence, especially those who have previously been dependent on male family members (Hazarika, 2020). NGOs also contribute to building leadership among women by forming village committees, organising capacity-building training for elected women representatives, and creating safe spaces for women to discuss community issues. Their work during flood disasters such as distributing relief materials, offering psychosocial support, and helping restore livelihoods further strengthens women's resilience. However, despite their important contributions, NGOs often face limitations such as funding shortages, staff constraints, and lack of coordination with government agencies. Strengthening NGO-government collaboration could significantly improve the reach and effectiveness of empowerment initiatives in Lakhimpur.



### ***Role of Self-Help Groups (SHGs)***

Self-Help Groups (SHGs) represent one of the most transformative forces in women's economic and social empowerment in Lakhimpur district. Under NRLM and ASRLM, thousands of rural women have organised into SHGs that facilitate savings, credit access, and collective entrepreneurship. SHGs provide women with an accessible platform for financial autonomy by allowing them to save small amounts regularly and access micro-loans for income-generating activities (Gogoi & Borah, 2021). In Lakhimpur, SHGs have successfully engaged women in weaving, fishery-related activities, livestock rearing, tailoring, food processing, and small retail ventures. These initiatives not only enhance household income but also improve women's decision-making power within the family. One of the most important outcomes of SHG participation is the enhancement of women's confidence and social mobility. Studies show that SHG members are more likely to participate in village meetings, negotiate prices in markets, travel independently, and engage with government officials compared to non-members (Hazarika, 2019). SHGs also play a crucial role in disseminating information about government schemes, health awareness, and financial services. During disasters, SHGs in Lakhimpur have mobilised resources, managed community kitchens, and supported vulnerable households, demonstrating their role in building community resilience.

However, SHGs also face several constraints. Limited access to larger loans, inadequate training in financial management, weak market linkages, and lack of digital literacy hinder the scaling up of their enterprises. Many SHGs struggle to ensure sustained quality production, obtain fair market prices, or expand beyond local markets. Strengthening institutional support, providing advanced skill training, improving credit facilities, and enhancing digital access are therefore essential to maximise the potential of SHGs in women's upliftment. Despite these limitations, SHGs remain one of the most successful grassroots models for empowering women economically, socially, and politically in Lakhimpur district.

### **Discussion**

The review of secondary literature makes it evident that women's upliftment in Lakhimpur district is shaped by a combination of socio-economic, cultural, and institutional factors. While Assam as a whole has made progress in literacy, healthcare access, and women's participation in economic activities, district-level disparities continue to influence



development outcomes. In Lakhimpur, improvements in female literacy and school enrolment reflect the positive impact of governmental educational schemes and infrastructural expansion. However, socio-cultural norms, early marriage, and limited exposure to vocational training continue to act as barriers to women's educational advancement, similar to patterns identified in studies across rural Assam (Borah, 2020; Gogoi, 2018). The persistence of these constraints indicates that educational reforms alone are insufficient unless accompanied by community-level sensitisation and skill-oriented initiatives tailored to women's needs.

Health forms another critical dimension where substantial gaps remain. Although the NFHS-5 data for Assam indicates improvements in institutional delivery and maternal healthcare utilisation, rural districts like Lakhimpur still face shortages of health professionals, inadequate transportation, and poor awareness about reproductive rights (IIPS & MoHFW, 2021). These structural issues are deepened by economic vulnerabilities, restricting women's ability to access timely and quality healthcare. The high prevalence of anaemia and malnutrition among women and adolescent girls echoes broader state-level patterns, highlighting the need for targeted nutritional interventions and stronger implementation of schemes such as the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) (Saikia, 2020). Economic participation among women in Lakhimpur presents a mixed scenario. While the growth of Self-Help Groups has increased women's involvement in small-scale enterprises, agriculture, and allied sectors, their earnings often remain low and irregular. This is consistent with findings from studies across Assam, which show that SHG participation enhances confidence and mobility but does not always lead to sustained economic independence (Baruah, 2019; Sharma & Das, 2022). A lack of market linkages, limited access to credit, and inadequate training undermine the potential of SHGs to drive transformational change. Furthermore, social expectations surrounding household responsibilities continue to restrict women's engagement in full-time or skilled employment.

Political representation remains limited, though the involvement of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions has increased after the enforcement of reservation policies. Women leaders in Lakhimpur, similar to those in other Assamese districts, often face challenges such as political interference from male family members, low exposure to administrative procedures, and inadequate training in public governance (Deka, 2021). Nonetheless, their presence in grassroots leadership positions indicates an important shift in gender norms and political participation patterns. Government schemes and NGO-led initiatives play an important enabling role, yet gaps in awareness and delivery restrict their



effectiveness. While programmes like the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), BetiBachaoBetiPadhao, and PM UjjwalaYojana have contributed positively, benefits are unevenly distributed, especially in remote and flood-prone regions of the district (Government of Assam, 2022). NGO and SHG initiatives supplement these efforts, but their coverage remains limited due to funding constraints and logistical challenges. The overall discussion suggests that multi-level challenges ranging from socio-cultural barriers to infrastructural deficits continue to shape women's upliftment in Lakhimpur. At the same time, the progress observed across various sectors highlights the potential for further advancement if government, community, and civil society interventions are better coordinated and contextually adapted.

## **Conclusion**

The review of secondary literature on women's upliftment in Lakhimpur district of Assam demonstrates that while significant progress has been made in recent decades, substantial challenges continue to hinder the holistic empowerment of women. Improvements in female literacy, rising school enrolment, and increased participation in self-help groups reflect a positive shift toward gender-inclusive development. Government schemes such as the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), BetiBachaoBetiPadhao, and various health and welfare programmes have contributed to enhancing women's access to education, healthcare, livelihood opportunities, and basic entitlements. Similarly, the involvement of NGOs and SHGs has fostered financial inclusion, skill development, and community-level awareness, creating platforms for women to build confidence and social networks.

However, the progress remains uneven and insufficient. Persistent socio-cultural barriers such as early marriage, gendered division of labour, limited mobility, and customary patriarchal norms continue to restrict women's educational and economic potential. Health indicators in Lakhimpur, particularly maternal health, nutritional status, and access to quality healthcare services, still lag behind state and national levels. Economic participation is growing but remains largely confined to low-income, unorganised sectors, where women lack adequate credit, training, market linkages, and long-term financial security. Political representation is improving through reservation policies, yet true decision-making power for women at the grassroots level remains limited due to institutional and social constraints.

Overall, the findings suggest that women's upliftment in Lakhimpur district requires a more integrated and multi-dimensional strategy. Strengthening the implementation of welfare



schemes, expanding health and educational infrastructure, enhancing livelihood training, and addressing socio-cultural norms through community engagement are essential for sustainable progress. Collaboration among government agencies, NGOs, SHGs, and local communities is crucial to ensure that the benefits of development reach every woman, including those in marginalised, rural, and flood-prone areas. While the district has made noteworthy advances, achieving genuine gender equality and empowerment will require sustained efforts, inclusive policy execution, and continuous monitoring. The study underscores the importance of a holistic approach that recognises women not merely as beneficiaries but as active agents of development in Lakhimpur district.

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