Chances and Limitations of Women’s Entrepreneurship as a Means of Women’s Empowerment in Northeast India

Jan Matern
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Supervisor: Rhiannon Pugh
Subject Reviewer: May-Britt Öhman
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Chances and Limitations of Women’s Entrepreneurship as a Means of Women’s Empowerment in Northeast India

JAN MATERN


Abstract:
Gender inequality and oppression of women are pressing issues in all countries around the world. Thus the 2030 Agenda of the United Nations declares gender equality as one of the Sustainable Development Goals. Many international organisations have developed projects that aim at supporting women’s entrepreneurship to empower women. Several scholars have written about the relationship of women’s entrepreneurship and women’s empowerment with mixed results regarding its potential for empowering women. In the Northeast Indian context the current academic literature is clearly favouring women’s entrepreneurship as a means of women’s empowerment, often without precisely conceptualising women’s empowerment. This study aims at shedding some light on whether entrepreneurship is beneficial for women empowerment. Next to a review of the current academic literature, qualitative interviews with women entrepreneurs in Northeast India as well as a focus group interview and expert interviews have been undertaken to gain further insights in this complex relationship. The findings show that there are indeed empowering elements in women’s entrepreneurship, but also that the complexity of women’s empowerment cannot sufficiently be addressed by solely focusing on supporting women entrepreneurs. Hence this study contributes to the ongoing discourse about the relationship of entrepreneurship and women empowerment in general and specifically questions the often very positive stance of scholars towards entrepreneurship as a means of women empowerment in the Northeast Indian context.

Keywords: Sustainable Development, Gender Equality, Women’s Empowerment, Entrepreneurship, India,

Jan Matern, Department of Earth Sciences, Uppsala University, Villavägen 16, SE-752 36 Uppsalal, Sweden
Chances and Limitations of Women’s Entrepreneurship as a Means of Women’s Empowerment and Emancipation in Northeast India

JAN MATERN


Summary:
Gender inequality and oppression of women are pressing issues in all countries around the world. Thus the 2030 Agenda of the United Nations declares gender equality as one of the Sustainable Development Goals. Many international organisations have developed projects that aim at supporting women’s entrepreneurship to empower women. It is often argued, that when women earn money themselves that they automatically gain a higher status within their communities and more decision-making power through this economic empowerment which subsequently translates into other spheres as political representation etc. Several scholars have written about the relationship of women’s entrepreneurship and women’s empowerment with mixed results regarding its potential for empowering women. In the Northeast Indian context the current academic literature is clearly favouring women’s entrepreneurship as a means of women’s empowerment, often without precisely defining women’s empowerment. This study aims at shedding some light on whether entrepreneurship is beneficial for women empowerment. Next to a review of the current academic literature, qualitative interviews with women entrepreneurs in Northeast India as well as a focus group interview and expert interviews have been undertaken to gain further insights in this complex relationship. The findings show that there are indeed empowering elements in women’s entrepreneurship, but also that the complexity of women’s empowerment cannot sufficiently be addressed by solely focusing on supporting women entrepreneurs. Hence this study contributes to the ongoing discourse about the relationship of entrepreneurship and women empowerment in general and specifically questions the often very positive stance of scholars towards entrepreneurship as a means of women empowerment in the Northeast Indian context.

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Jan Matern, Department of Earth Sciences, Uppsala University, Villavägen 16, SE- 752 36 Uppsala, Sweden
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1. Introduction

The violent death of a female student after being brutally raped by several men on a public bus in Delhi 2011, succeeded by more reports of horrific crimes against women in India, made headlines all around the world (Mandhana & Trivedi 2012). Indian newspapers almost daily report about new incidents of violence against women (TOI 2019, HT 2019), which are associated with deeply entrenched sexist beliefs in the patriarchal Indian society (Hill & Marshall 2018). However, this type of crimes and general oppression of women is a global phenomenon and even Sweden, a country that is widely regarded as one of the most gender equal countries, has significant appearances of sexual assault of women which for example led to the postponement of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2018 when a person closely linked to the Swedish Academy was accused of sexual abuse by several women (Gemzoe 2018; Mahanta & Nayak 2013; Guardian 2018).

India ranked 108 out of 149 states in the Global Gender Gap Report (WEF 2018) and 130 out of 189 in the Gender Development Index (UNDP 2017). Major inequalities between men and women are being reported in a wide range of areas, including a strong preference for the male child and thus an unnatural sex ratio at birth (OECD 2019), almost a 4 times higher income of men (UNDP 2019) as well as almost half of the years spent in school by girls (UNDP 2019).

In the 2030 Agenda with its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) the United Nations (UN) provided a framework for Sustainable Development (SD) (UN 2015). SDG Number 5 “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls” directly addresses sexual violence, unequal economic opportunities and political underrepresentation of women (UN 2015). International agencies like the European Training Foundation (ETF) or the International Labour Organisation (ILO) have created women entrepreneurship support programmes as a means to empower women (ETF 2014, ILO 2019). The World Bank created the Women Entrepreneurs Finance Initiative (We-Fi) which aims for mobilizing 1 billion US$ to support female entrepreneurs around the globe (World Bank 2017).

The Central Indian Government as well as governments on state level have launched several projects and policies to promote and support women entrepreneurship (MoMSME 2018 & GoKCID 2014). The Industrial Policy Plan of the state of Karnataka almost solely mentions women in the function of entrepreneurs (GoKCID 2014). Additionally, a range of academic literature within the Indian context attests female entrepreneurial activity as a great opportunity to empower women (Das 2012; Pandey 2015; Deka 2018).

Since there are so many efforts being made on promoting women’s entrepreneurship to empower women it seems important to question some underlying assumptions:

Does entrepreneurship change the overall situation of women and if yes to what extent? Is it possible to transform a society towards more gender equality through supporting women entrepreneurship?

1.1 Problem Statement and Aim

This thesis tries to explore how women’s entrepreneurship may lead to women’s empowerment in Northeast India. There have been studies about women’s entrepreneurship and empowerment in Northeast India (Das 2012; Datta & Gailey 2012; Deka 2018), which highlight the economic benefits for women who pursue entrepreneurship. They however focus on economic empowerment and leave power relations within the society aside. Hence this study will focus on how entrepreneurial activity of women improves their situation within the current system and how prevalent gender norms are being challenged through this process. Therefore, the circumstances women are exposed to in Northeast India will be explored. The review of current academic literature on women empowerment, entrepreneurship and gender will be guiding the following analysis of interviews with female entrepreneurs and experts. Furthermore there are studies that highlight the causal relationship of female entrepreneurial activity leading to women empowerment without giving much explanation for this link (Balasundaram et al. 2010) and others, especially in the Indian context that do not adequately
conceptualise empowerment or portray it in a one-sided manner (Das 2012; Pandey 2015; Limbu & Bordoloi 2015).

1.2 Research Questions
To address these subjects within the regional context of Northeast India three research questions are leading this thesis:

1. How are female entrepreneurs affected by the regional institutional setting in Northeast India?
2. How do women entrepreneurs act upon these circumstances?
3. How does the concept of empowerment materialise in this case and how does it relate to existing literature?

1.3 Structure of the Thesis
This thesis will start with exploring the regional setting in Northeast India and introducing basic facts about the geography, history and economy among others. This section is followed by the literature review in which the different theoretical concepts as empowerment, entrepreneurship and gender are defined and set in relationship with each other. Additionally a short summary of existing publications on the connection between women empowerment and entrepreneurship is given. The method section explains the choice of methods and the rationale behind them as well as stating limitations of the thesis and positionality of the author. It is followed by the results chapter, which displays the empirical data organized by themes regarding the narrative interviews with the entrepreneurs and brief summaries in case of the experts in order to introduce the regional setting from their viewpoint. The subsequent discussion combines literature and gathered data to analyse the case and put it into perspective with other studies. Lastly the conclusion will briefly answer the research questions and give a short outlook on potential further investigations.
2. Regional Background

2.1 Northeast India

Northeast India is the most north eastern region of India, connected to mainland India only by a 22km wide corridor called ‘chicken neck’. It consists of 8 states: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. About 99% of its boundaries are international borders, with the neighbouring states being Bhutan, Tibet, Myanmar, Bangladesh and Nepal (GoI 2009). The region inhabits around 45 million people (2011) who account for 3.76% of the Indian population (Dikshit & Dikshit 2014). It is widely regarded as less economically developed compared to other regions in India, due to its “remoteness, difficult terrain, infrastructural bottlenecks and unfriendly neighbours” (GoI 2009, p.1). Nevertheless, a great potential for hydropower and economic development is acknowledged because of favourable climatic conditions for agriculture, proximity to the Southeast Asian market, and the abundance of beautiful landscapes and rich biodiversity (ibid.).

2.1.1 History

Since the thirteenth century Assam was ruled by the Ahoms until the invasion by Burmese forces in 1819 who occupied the whole of Assam and Manipur and occasionally even raiding British territory. That caused war between the Burmese kingdom and the East India company leading to the treaty of Yandabo in 1826 which bound the Burmese to leave Assam and Manipur. Thereafter the previous rulers of Assam and Manipur were reinstated by the British. Manipur was reconstituted as a princely state and Assam was annexed to the British territory after the Ahom King could not pay the annual tribute in 1838 leading to an end of the 600-year rule of the Ahoms in Assam (Dikshit & Dikshit 2014).

The years of colonial rule were characterized by exploitation of people and natural resources, most prominently through vast tea plantations owned by Europeans who employed Indian labourers to almost slave-like conditions. Although slavery became abolished, most of the people working in the agricultural sector had to pay high rents for the land they were working on with which four folded within 25 years and put a huge strain on the people. These fees had to be paid by everyone, only about half of the big European-owned tea farms were exempted (Dikshit & Dikshit 2014).

In 1947 India gained its independence from British rule and Assam became a state within the newly founded federal system of India, apart from the Sylhet District in east Assam which merged into East Pakistan now known as Bangladesh. Two years later in 1949 Manipur merged into the Indian Union and became an own state in 1971 (Dikshit & Dikshit 2014). Between 1949 and 1971 the Northeast experienced rapid changes in its territorial organization: In 1963 the Naga Hills in East Assam became Nagaland state, subsequently Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya and Mizoram seceded from Assam in 1971 and 1972. These reorganisations of territory are often linked to specific tribes and ethnicities that aspired self-governance rather than being marginalized in the “Assamese behemoth” (ibid., p.56).

2.1.2 Peoples and Conflicts

The population of Northeast India consists to 30% out of tribal people belonging to more than 200 tribes or subtribes which constitute the majority of the population in most states. In Assam however only 12.4% are considered to belong to the scheduled tribes, whereas the huge majority belongs to the Assamese, which does not encompass, that it is homogenous in terms of faith, language and race. In present day, the tribal population accounts for 40% of the total population in Manipur and is situated in the hilly areas, whereas the remaining nontribal population inhabits the plains around the capital Imphal.
The different cultures and ethnicities contribute to violence within the region until the present day. Numerous strikes, insurrections, protests, riots and shutdowns (bandhs) affect people’s lives. Different ethnic groups claiming different territories within states or parties demanding the expansion of state territory cause occasional outbreaks of violence. In Manipur “innumerable insurgent groups, with undefined or poorly defined objectives […] operate as liberators. […] Occasional blockade by these groups choke the supply lines of Manipur” (Dikshit & Dikshit 2014, p.754) thus preventing systemic changes in the welfare of the people and challenging existing businesses.

Furthermore the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) from 1958, which gives various rights to military and paramilitary personnel within the Northeast is a continuous source of violence and harmful practices. When the Central Government of India declares a region or state as ‘disturbed’ under AFSPA, the military is bestowed with immense rights, such as impunity for any action by military personnel, searching houses without a warrant and dispersing congregations of 5 or more people. This act is in place in Assam, most parts of Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir. It is often linked to human rights violations through the military, e.g. extrajudicial killings, rape, official corruption and a general violation of civil rights (Ngaihte 2015).

2.1.3 Economy

The economy is heavily dominated by the agricultural sector. Important agricultural products are rice, tea, rubber, tropical fruits, bamboo and areca nut. The main plantation crop is tea with over 30.000 tea farms, which are mainly in Assam. Industry contributes on average 20% to the state income which is much lower than in other parts of India. Most industries are based on local natural resources such as weaving, forest-based industries, oil and natural gas and petrochemicals. The transport situation is characterized by a lack of infrastructure, remoteness and bad road conditions, which make the distribution of goods even to mainland India challenging and costly. Additionally, the common state-wide shutdowns and insurgencies over the past 6 decades scare of investors and obstruct the operation of businesses (Dikshit & Dikshit 2014).

The share of women in the formal part of the labour force has receded slightly between 2010 and 2011 (-1.34 %) and accounts for around 7.6 % of formally employed people. Women are even more underrepresented in the public sector (5.2%) compared to the private sector (10.3%) (GoINECS 2015).

2.1.4 Gender Inequality in Northeast India

Mahanta and Nayak (2013) conducted a quantitative assessment of gender equality in Northeast India based on four different themes: Political participation, education, health and economic participation. For this purpose, they compared statistical data for different indicators such as infant mortality, school enrolment, work participation and sex ratio.

They found significant gender gaps in literacy and school enrolment, which in seven out of eight states (excluding Assam) narrowed significantly between 2001 and 2011. Also, the female participation in the labour market was on average significantly lower than that of men with gaps as wide as 44% in urban Assam, in Manipur however the labour force consisted of 9.5% more women than men (2004-2005). Infant mortality rates revealed only small gaps in favour of male children.

Regarding the political representation through women the authors note that it is often difficult for women to express their political views and it is often expected that they mirror the political views of their husbands or fathers (Mahanta & Nayak 2013). Official representation through women on a state or national level ranges from 0-10% of the members of parliament, on a community level it is slightly better with women accounting for roughly one third of all representatives (ibid.).

The authors conclude that there are significant differences within the region when it comes to gender equality, with Manipur being above Northeast India average, especially when it comes to labour
participation, which is linked to the existence of all women markets, where men are not allowed to sell. So compared to the national Indian average the Northeast seems to be slightly more gender equal. However, they demand a “revolutionary change in the social and cultural values and behavioral patterns […] to foster the process of gender equality” (Mahanta & Nayak 2013, p. 13).

Table 1. Socioeconomic and demographic profile of Northeast India and national average
(alternated, source: Singh 2013)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicators</th>
<th>Northeast</th>
<th>India</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population in million</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>1210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urbanization</td>
<td>15,7</td>
<td>27,8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female illiteracy</td>
<td>36,0</td>
<td>50,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes population</td>
<td>33,3</td>
<td>24,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of population in the poorest wealth quintile</td>
<td>22,1</td>
<td>24,8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean age at first marriage</td>
<td>18,1</td>
<td>17,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean children ever born</td>
<td>3,0</td>
<td>3,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of currently married women using modern contraceptive methods</td>
<td>22,9</td>
<td>35,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of women do not have any exposure of mass media</td>
<td>28,8</td>
<td>33,9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of women utilized full antenatal care</td>
<td>44,8</td>
<td>52,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of women utilized skilled birth attendance</td>
<td>27,0</td>
<td>38,8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Singh (2013) investigated regional and gender differences of child immunization in India. He observed a general disadvantage of female children and a very narrow gap in the Northeast between 1992-2006. In 1992 18.1% of male children and 20.7% of female children received full immunization in Northeast (in 2006 34.2% / 35.1%) compared to a national average of 36.7% male to 34.1% female (in 2006 45.4% to 41.6%). Whereas on national level more male children receive vaccinations, the Northeast shows a different scenario in which slightly more females are being fully immunized (ibid.) A look on the other indicators (Table 1) shows a drastically smaller amount of female illiteracy in the Northeast but also less health support before and during birth.
3. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This section will provide insight into the academic work on entrepreneurship, gender, and empowerment and constitute the theoretical framework for the subsequent analysis of the gathered empirical material.

The need for women empowerment has been expressed by numerous organizations, scholars, and governments (UN 2015, ILO 2019, Pandey 2015). Different publications and government interventions suggest a possible way of achieving women empowerment through supporting women entrepreneurship. The following section will introduce the different concepts of entrepreneurship, gender, empowerment, and emancipation, explore linkages and give an overview about the existing literature.

The relationship between entrepreneurship and women empowerment/emancipation has been explored in several publications in recent years (Güney-Frahm 2018; Alkhaled & Berglund 2018; Rindova et al. 2009 etc.). Also women entrepreneurship in Northeast India has been researched by a number of researchers (Dutta 2016; Das 2012; Deka 2018; etc.). Literature regarding the regional institutional setting will be discussed in the last part of this section.

The term institutions is used according to the definition of North “Institutions are the rules of the game in a society or, more formally, are the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction” (cited in: Acemoglu 2004, p.1). This wide definition is used because economic as well as social phenomena cannot be fully understood without studying the underlying principles and customs that guide life in a society (Acemoglu 2004).

3.1 Entrepreneurship and Gender

This part of the section elaborates on the concept of entrepreneurship and its relation to gender. It explores the historic origins of the context and highlights in which way entrepreneurship is not at all gender neutral. Additionally, one case of studying successful female entrepreneurs without depicting them as the counterpart of men is featured as an example of possible ways to address the innate gender bias prevalent in most academic literature about entrepreneurship.

Nightingale (2006) argues that gender “does not refer to women or to differences between men and women. Rather, gender is the process through which differences based on presumed biological sex are defined, imagined, and become significant in specific contexts” (p.171). This leads in combination with other factors such as race, class, wealth, and education to inequalities of power based on the different properties attributed to the different genders. To change gender domination, the various aspects of it have to be understood by the subjects, otherwise gender inequality is reproduced over and over again (ibid.). Hanson (2009) adds that traditional ideas of masculinity and femininity still shape realities of many individuals, since these concepts are widely being internalized by institutions and people, leading to certain behavior towards men and women. Thus, the gender division of labour is widespread, certain jobs are male dominated and there is a profound wage gap in almost all countries (ibid.).

Hamilton (2013) contends that the prevalent academic discourse about entrepreneurship is strongly shaped by male stereotypes, which portrays women only in the form of deviating from the “male norm” and conceals real insights into women’s entrepreneurship. She calls for a new way of researching entrepreneurship with focus on gender issues to prevent the reproduction of old role models. She draws upon several studies that researched the representation of entrepreneurship through the media and often portrayed the entrepreneur as male, “typically the heroic adventurer, individualistic, ruthless and aggressive” (Hamilton 2013, p.91), depicting entrepreneurial activity mainly as taking over businesses and launching them. Moreover in the rare cases female entrepreneurs were interviewed, their stories were often connected to domestic life and questions about household duties and responsibilities for child care were often central to the coverage (ibid.).
She furthermore argues that not only media representation but also academic research about entrepreneurship is heavily influenced by andro-centric research, which does not consider the experiences and existence of non-male entrepreneurs. Beginning with Casson’s (1982) characterization of entrepreneurs as business men and bridging over to a more recent highly influential study by Down (2006) about self-identity of entrepreneurs, which implicitly portrays entrepreneurial identities unquestionably as male. She acknowledges the existence of especially recent publications about women entrepreneurship but concludes that these always focus on gender differences, while the mainstream literature that does not specifically focus on gender exclusively, features men as their research subjects (Hamilton 2013).

This preference for the male entrepreneur seems explainable through the narrative during the industrialization where work became divided into domestic duties, which were foremostly covered by women and male-dominated wage labour, thus generating still prevailing narratives of men being rational and competitive and women being sensitive and altruistic; which led to the common view of “women as non-economic agents” (Hamilton 2013, p. 94). Concerning entrepreneurship, this means that a lot of home based endeavours of female entrepreneurs can be seen as actually reinforcing disempowering gender roles and thus working against women empowerment (Hamilton 2013).

Berglund et al. (2017) agree on the male dominance of the entrepreneurship discourse but focus on studies that tell the stories of successful female entrepreneurs. They build their research on the self-presentation of three successful female entrepreneurs on a Swedish radio show and use a life narrative approach to analyse their stories in regard to how the concepts of gender and entrepreneurship materialise in their cases. They observed that women ancestors played a big role in their stories, whereas men were mentioned in different types of relationships e.g. as fathers, partners etc. but remained somewhat marginalized. Furthermore, the relationship of their success in business is described as a “double-edged sword” where these women clearly made “profit from reproducing women’s subordination” (Berglund et al. 2017, p 297), be it as selling magazines that exploit women’s insecurities or blogging about homemaking and thus emphasizing the benefits of the stereotypical “traditional female role”. They conclude that having a story-centred approach to analyzing women entrepreneurship allows focusing on the women’s stories instead of presenting women just as the ‘other’ or male counterparts (Berglund et al. 2017).

3.2 Women’s Empowerment

Women’s empowerment has been discussed in numerous publications. In the following part different angles on the topic are briefly presented, which constitute the framework of the subsequent analysis.

Inglis (1997) notes that “through power that what is known, what is said, what is taken for granted, and what is regarded as the truth are constituted” (p.4). Subsequently he defines empowerment as a process allowing an individual to cope with the current circumstances and thrive within the system without changing anything about existing power structures. Whereas emancipation concerns the analysis of the status quo power relationships and resistance against them with the intent of changing the current system (Inglis 1997).

Expanding empowerment to the gender aspect, Moghadam & Senftova define women’s empowerment as a “multi-dimensional process of achieving basic capabilities, legal rights, and participation in key social, economic, political and cultural domains” (2005, p.399). They map a framework for measuring women’s empowerment consisting of seven domains and 44 indicators (Appendix 1). The first domain ‘Socio-demographic indicators’ encompasses different statistical values as sex ratio, age at first marriage, fertility rate and life expectancy. The second ‘Bodily integrity and health’ is composed of data of maternal mortality rate, prevalence of sexual abuse of women, contraceptive prevalence etc. The third one concerns literacy and years of schooling as well as tertiary education enrolment. ‘Economic participation and rights’ consists of the female share of paid labour force, estimated net income and the availability and quality of paid maternity leave. Further dimensions regard the political representation through women on national and state level, the ‘cultural participation and rights and the ‘Ratification of international legal frames for women’s rights (Moghadam & Senftova 2005). They
remark however that this framework is not suitable to identify inequalities within groups and does not count unpaid labour as well as informal work. Additionally, relevant data might not be available and quantitative indicators do not accurately represent the living conditions of individuals (ibid.). Nonetheless, their framework inspired some of the questions used within the interviews in the effort to grasp the phenomenon of women empowerment.

Kabeer (1999) reflects on women’s empowerment and introduces it as a “process by which those who have been denied the ability to make life choice acquire such an ability” (p. 435) and subsequently defines three dimensions of empowerment: Resources, agency and achievements. For that purpose she analysed different studies about women’s empowerment and also adds ideas about the measurement of women’s empowerment.

She starts by arguing that feminist policies are easier passed and implemented when they are based on proposed synergies between feminist ideas and mainstream development agenda instead of just the former, since changing power structures is usually not the first priority of policy makers and those who gain from a change in power structures do mostly not have the same amount of influence as those currently in power (Kabeer 1999). Thus instrumentalising women empowerment as a means to achieve other goals as well e.g. economic growth allows policy makers to focus on traditional goals. This brings women’s empowerment forward but also has its costs as more radical ideas may not be considered and only those parts are of interest which seem promising for reaching other goals as well. One outcome of this is the quantification of empowerment, the translation into sets of indicators, which make empowerment measurable and allow judgement about whether an intervention has been successful or not. This could lead to a simplistic understanding of empowerment in which only indicators that are easy to measure are taken into account and others are left out (Kabeer 1999).

She understands empowerment as a process of change from being disempowered and thus not having many choices about life to being empowered and executing a high amount of personal choice. Choice however means that there are possible alternatives that could be chosen, which presupposes that basic needs of a person are met. There are differences in the importance of choices, first order choices relate to basic livelihood, choice of spouse, number of children etc. Second order choices have less implications on the life of a person (Kabeer 1999).

The first dimension of empowerment regards resources not only in their physical availability but also as access to networks and human relationships. Access to resources resembles a person’s position in society and gives insights in current norms and values that govern the allocation of those resources, which leads to a reflection of existing power structures (Kabeer 1999).

Agency as the capacity of being able to live life by self-defined aims constitutes the second dimension and can be explained through the ability of a person to pursue self-interests while facing opposition. Furthermore, social rules and regulations execute power which can limit agency and reproduce traditional outcomes (Kabeer 1999). The combination of resources and agency resemble the potential of freedom of self-determination (ibid.).

To establish good indicators for measuring women’s empowerment Kabeer proposes to firstly consider indicators that give information about the basic needs and if these are fulfilled, e.g. health, nutrition and shelter. If there are significant gender gaps in this category, major gender inequalities can be assumed. Since these indicators are mostly relevant in situations of a general scarcity of resources gender inequalities in more prosperous parts of the society cannot be measured adequately. Hence a set of more complex indicators about outcomes (achievements) constitute the third dimension. Political representation would be an example of these complex achievements. However she notes that the general problem with measures and indicators still exists no matter how sophisticated they are: The measures are always defined by those who measure and thus the values held high in these studies are usually external (Kabeer 1999).

Principal difficulty is the concept of choice. Especially when choices undermine the own well-being and stem from traditional, patriarchal customs, like son preference, discriminating against the girl child, oppression of daughters in law through mothers in law etc. In these cases women have internalized their lesser status given to them by society, act accordingly and thus perpetuate oppression
of girls and women (Kabeer 1999). Power is not only exercised through constraints but also through values and (unconscious) beliefs, which make it necessary to question whether alternatives to the choice made “were not only materially possible but whether they were conceived to be within the realms of possibility” (Kabeer 1999, p.442). Subsequently, to be able to transform society in regard to existing inequalities the potential for change through choices is another criterium which should be evaluated (ibid.).

She concludes with a critique of resources, agency and achievements as indicators for women empowerment by saying that these cannot be accurate as long as the underlying assumptions and the potential for actual societal change are not innate and that they can even be misleading because of the complexity of women’s empowerment (Kabeer 1999). Enabling women to have access to resources and supporting their agency does not automatically lead to women’s empowerment but creates a new perspective on alternatives which can open up the possibility of future societal transformation (ibid.).

It becomes apparent that empowerment is a very complex phenomenon which is not easily definable and has different dimensions. For this study all presented definitions play a role in the analysis, since they highlight different parts of empowerment.

3.3 Regional Context and Women’s Empowerment through Entrepreneurship

Examples of studies of women entrepreneurship are available of most parts of the world although the Global South is deemed to be understudied (Tedmanson et al. 2012). In the following different studies that either focused on the relationship between entrepreneurship and empowerment and/or researched women entrepreneurship in a specific regional context are presented.

Hanson (2009) acknowledges gender divisions within entrepreneurship but supposes that female entrepreneurship can lead to social change, most notably through the creation of networks and the change of a woman’s life when she starts becoming an entrepreneur. (Non-) governmental programmes are crucial for this transformative process which support female entrepreneurship e.g. through vocational training or microfinance. She discusses four geographic studies of women’s entrepreneurship in different geographical settings focusing on how women change their lives and transform their surroundings through their businesses.

One of them highlights how women in Botswana have significantly smaller and less desirable land in the agricultural sector compared to men and subsequently lesser yield and income. Broiler farming is a traditionally female-led business in Botswana and a governmental micro loan scheme has enabled many to start their own business in that field. Despite the lack of a formal networking programme informal networks of entrepreneurs offer platforms for exchange of experiences and information as well as general support. This has led to higher incomes and to a “strategic change in women’s circumstances and positions in society” (Hovorka 2006 cited in Hanson 2009, p. 256).

Many women in India do not have access to formal jobs and secure employment and thus have to find other ways of generating income. To obtain loans is often difficult since they lack collateral and are thus not eligible for standard bank loans. The Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) supports female microentrepreneurs since the early 1970s not only through microcredits and skill training but also in gaining rights to receive social security, work in public spaces and ensure access to low-cost housing and transportation. In recent years it has also started launching projects to change female identity throughout South Asia, with the aim to alter the status quo and enable women to live freer, more self-determined lives. Only through emphasizing “psychological empowerment rather than immediate income generation have women managed to gain the skills and confidence that enable them to challenge – however partially – the gender hierarchy” (Baruah 2004 cited in Hanson 2009, p.257).

One study conducted in Lima portrayed the effects of five NGO projects that focused on microenterprises led by women and supported them in a similar way as SEWA in South Asia. The initial situation of the poor urban women was quite devastating as some of them could not afford
proper nutrition for them and their families. Next to microcredits and skills training the interventions also featured psychological training in creating an identity disentangled from the traditional setting, which marginalizes and subordinates women in society. These efforts showed tremendous effects and transformed women from a mostly passive and patient perspective towards a more active and engaging outlook on life (Hays-Mitchell 1999, 2000, 2002 cited in Hanson 2009).

She concludes that women entrepreneurship can be a means of transforming gender identity and the position of women in society. This alleviation of gender inequalities can however not be attributed to the provision of micro credit alone. Next to the economic empowerment the fostering of strong support structures and networks is crucial to enable women to change the status quo. These kinds of networks can be informal and unmanaged as in Botswana or created through NGOs as in India and Peru (Hanson 2009).

Alkhaled & Berglund (2018) conducted life narrative interviews with female entrepreneurs in Saudi Arabia and Sweden to get more insights of how entrepreneurship and empowerment relate to each other. For this purpose they adopt an institutional view and Inglis (1997) view on empowerment and emancipation who defines empowerment as an individual’s ability to work well within the current institutional setting and emancipation as actively questioning and resisting prevalent power structures. In 26 interviews they identify the themes subordination, empowerment and emancipation and juxtapose the Swedish and the Saudi Arabian case, not to compare them but to display the different themes within their regional setting and find similarities (Alkhaled & Berglund 2018).

Their findings in regard to subordination show that women in Sweden as well as in Saudi Arabia talk about subordination within their lives. In Saudi Arabia women are legally excluded from a variety of jobs and have to seek permission from a male family member to start a business or even travel. Sweden, a country often regarded as one of the most gender equal countries does also not provide women with equal opportunities but in a different way. Here women are legally equal to men but face discriminations in male dominated industries as well as a lack of access to senior management positions which are based on social structures. In both countries women are confronted with different ‘formal and institutional boundaries’ as well as prevalent role models within their families e.g. household duties (Alkhaled & Berglund 2018).

Forms of empowerment materialise in “education, family support, women entrepreneur networks, employing other women and support through men” (Alkhaled & Berglund 2018, p. 892) and emancipation is achieved through supporting other women in their businesses as well as different forms of social entrepreneurship, aimed at helping women to disentangle their lives from oppression (ibid.).

They conclude that although the women portrayed in their study have empowered themselves and helped other women to follow suit, signs of changing power relations are not visible on a broad scale. Thus entrepreneurship might not be a desirable way to reach emancipation, they argue that the focus on entrepreneurship as a vehicle for social transformation might be problematic since it could lead to neglect of other forms of social change like politics or activism (Alkhaled & Berglund 2018).

Barragan et al. (2018) reached similar findings when analyzing life narrative interviews with women entrepreneurs from the United Arab Emirates. They found micro-emancipatory acts of women resisting men’s orders strategically by manipulating, explaining, persuading and convincing them to allow them to open a business, travel, meet business partners etc. They do not confront men openly and formally obey them by requesting support in their endeavours. This ‘strategic- disobedience is seen as an emancipatory act that constitutes a “meaningful challenge to [men’s] power” (Barragan et al. 2018, p.587). However, they only discuss changes in power relations on an individual level and do not make any implications for long lasting social change.

Karki & Xheneti (2018) explore whether the formalisation of female entrepreneurs leads to women empowerment. Their qualitative study of 30 female entrepreneurs revealed an increased confidence among the women, acquired through their entrepreneurial activity which enabled them to change their lives in a positive way. The additional income inspired a change in identity away from seeing themselves only as mothers and homemakers. They conclude that equipping women with business
skills and special training might inspire the women to formalize their businesses and subsequently lead to women empowerment.

Verduijn & Essers (2013) on the other hand question the emancipatory potential of entrepreneurship. They argue that through the overwhelmingly positive discourse about entrepreneurship other economic actors become marginalized and groups or individuals who don’t seem to be capable of becoming entrepreneurs are excluded. In their study they compared the perspectives of female migrant entrepreneurs in the Netherlands with Dutch government institutions. They found that entrepreneurship has indeed its downsides especially if it’s used as a tool for elevating disempowered groups in a uniform manner. They problematize not entrepreneurship itself but more so the notion of stimulating entrepreneurship to empower certain groups in a society, because it perpetuates the overly optimistic discourse about entrepreneurship and tries to make “women conform to Western entrepreneurship standards” (Verduijn & Essers 2013, p.626).

Verduijn et al. (2014) try to integrate the different concepts of the linkage between empowerment and entrepreneurship by suggesting that both oppression and empowerment lie within it. They furthermore distinguish between emancipation in terms of challenging power structures in a society as well as micro-manifestations of emancipation as epitomized by entrepreneurship’s engagement in localized, everyday struggles and practices of freedom” (Verduijn et al. 2014, p.101).

3.4 Women’s Entrepreneurship in the Indian Context

Das (2012) conducted a study about women entrepreneurs in the Guwahati Area in Assam aiming at shedding light on their family background and obstacles. She states in the beginning that “Once a woman feels that she is economically strong, she will feel equal to man in all respect” (Das 2012, p. 27). She refers to women entrepreneurship as the appropriate tool to reach this goal. However she does not explain further what empowerment means and seems to only refer to an additional income source for the women. She further does not criticize the concept of entrepreneurship and concludes with “Developing entrepreneurship among women will be the right approach for empowerment of women” (Das 2012, p. 29)

Pandey (2015) also focuses her study on barriers for women entrepreneurs and argues that gender inequality between women and men is mostly based on a lack of participation of women in the labour market, limited economic opportunities and no decision-making power. She suggests enhancing women entrepreneurship through skill development programmes and help with the acquisition of loans and concludes that “entrepreneurship is the best way to empower women socially, economically and politically” (Pandey 2015, p. 4278) without specifying how women entrepreneurship would be able to achieve that. She also does not mention any critical points about entrepreneurship and does not reflect upon empowerment in a deeper sense e.g. underlying societal values.

Limbu & Bordoloi (2015) focused in their study on the challenges of female entrepreneurs in rural areas of Assam. They observed a tremendous difference between urban and rural entrepreneurs and argued that it is difficult for women to set up their own businesses in rural areas out of several reasons. They describe the prevalent traditional image of women as homemakers as a major hindrance to acceptance of women in a business contexts, next to issues with finance, a lack of time and knowledge. Other institutional factors such as inadequate infrastructure, dearth of training facilities and missing government action. To overcome these barriers they suggest cooperative action among government, social and financial institutions in regard to enabling women entrepreneurs to successfully run their businesses. They see an enormous potential for women’s entrepreneurship and view it as a “revolutionary concept” (p. 118) for Indian society and a means of women’s empowerment since it would bestow confidence on women and lead to economic independence which “has very positive correlation with women empowerment” (Limbu & Bordoloi 2015, p. 118). Again entrepreneurship is seen as something entirely positive, which can change the whole society and potential adverse effects are not being discussed.
3.5 Summary

The literature shows that entrepreneurship is a deeply-gendered phenomenon which encompasses in mainstream discourse many sexist elements. The traditional image depicts an entrepreneur as male, featuring stereotypical qualities as aggressiveness and ruthlessness, framing women entrepreneurs mostly as the ‘other’. Hamilton argues that this image is up until today recreated by media and academia but its roots stem from the times of industrialization when men started working in factories and earning money and women worked in their homes without getting paid and thus were perceived as “non-economic agents” (Hamilton 2013, p. 94). Whereas others argue that the gender division of labour is much older and dates back to ancient hunter gatherer communities (Marlowe 2007, Dahlberg 1981).

Women’s empowerment is a complex concept, which has different dimensions that can be considered. Inglis (1997) defines it as being able to cope well within the circumstances opposed by the system in contrast to emancipation, which he sees as the transformative process which questions power structures. The difficulties of measuring women’s empowerment through quantitative indicators becomes clear through Kabeer’s (1999) analysis, in which she claims that the quantification of empowerment does not do justice to its complexity and can be misleading.

There are many studies about women’s empowerment and entrepreneurship in different regional contexts (Alkhaled et al. 2018; Barragan et al. 2018; Berglund et al. 2017; etc.), which attribute different degrees of transformative potential to female entrepreneurship, but also discuss adverse effects on women’s lives. Some studies in the Indian context claim that entrepreneurship is highly beneficial for women’s empowerment, but do not conceptualise empowerment or portray it in a very one-sided manner (Das 2012; Pandey 2015; Limbu & Bordolo 2015).
4. Methods

This chapter explains how I have conducted my study about female entrepreneurs in Northeast India through a multiple case study as described by Yin (2009), who suggested using case study research to explore contemporary phenomena, especially when the author has no control over the events (Table 2). He defines a case study as an “empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin 2009, p.18).

Table 2. Relevance of different research methods within the social sciences
(alternated; source: Yin 2009)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>(1) Form of Research Question</th>
<th>(2) Requires Control of Behavioural Events?</th>
<th>(3) Focuses on Contemporary Events?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experiment</td>
<td>how, why?</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>who, what, where, how many, how much</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Archival Analysis</td>
<td>who, what, where, how many, how much</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes/no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>how, why?</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case Study</td>
<td>how, why?</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.1 Choice of the Case

In the autumn and spring 2018/19 I was interning at the German development agency GIZ in Delhi. This agency runs about 35 sustainable development projects within India. One of them is the “Economic Empowerment of Women Entrepreneurs and Start-ups by Women” project which has one of its project locations in the Northeast (GIZ 2019). Since the Northeast seemed to be much less explored by scholars than the other location (Karnataka) I was intrigued by the opportunity to go there and conduct my study. In December 2018 I had the opportunity to join a consultation workshop in on
‘Assessing the state of Women Entrepreneurship in the North Eastern Region’, where the focus group interview with established entrepreneurs took place. Subsequently I was able to reach out to participating entrepreneurs and asked them if I could interview them for my thesis.

Apart from the opportune circumstances that allowed me to collect empirical data in Northeast India, the necessity for more research within women entrepreneurship is expressed e.g. through Tedmanson et al. (2012) who call for more research on entrepreneurship in India and the Global South as well as attention on “entrepreneurial activity as resistance or self-determination” (p. 538). Furthermore there are studies that highlight the causal relationship of female entrepreneurial activity leading to women empowerment without giving much explanation for this link (Balasundaram et al. 2010) and others, especially in the Indian context that do not adequately conceptualise empowerment (Das 2012; Pandey 2015; Limbu & Bordoloi 2015).

4.2 Design of the Case Study

The aim of this thesis was to understand the liberating features of female entrepreneurship in Northeast India as well as the limitations of this concept. For this purpose, eight interviews with female entrepreneurs were conducted: four in Assam and four in Manipur. The entrepreneurs were contacted at a Consultation workshop between a German development company and the Indian Institute for Entrepreneurship (IIE). To enrich the data and get more perspectives on the phenomena of female entrepreneurship and women empowerment in India, four experts on these topics were interviewed: One high-level government official, who is involved with supporting entrepreneurship, one human rights activist, who worked with women’s rights in Northeast India, one representative of a women entrepreneur organization and one gender expert within the development sector. The interviews were conducted between January and March 2019. Additionally, observations of the interview situations as well as one focus group interview which was undertaken in December 2018 have been used to triangulate the data and allow more significant results.

4.3 Interviews

Eight life narrative interviews were conducted with female entrepreneurs, in urban settings in Assam and Manipur. The interviews lasted between 20 minutes and one hour and were digitally recorded. They took place in either the women’s businesses or public places as cafes or hotel lobbies. To triangulate the data and get another perspective on the topic, four semi-structured expert interviews were conducted, which took place mostly at the work place of the interviewed person and lasted from 30 to 45 minutes.

Before each interview an information sheet was handed out, which informed the interviewees about the purpose of the study and what would happen to their personal data. It was mentioned that all of their data would be anonymized and they would only appear through aliases in any publication. They then were asked for their consent to be recorded and that their data could be used in this study. For this purpose they signed a form of consent.

The interviews with the entrepreneurs were based on a life story narrative which allows insights in how they view the world and how they construct their identities (Johansson 2004). It also let the interviewees the freedom of emphasizing what they thought was important and made it possible to identify themes within their responses. Berglund et al. (2017) studied entrepreneurial narratives and found feminist tendencies ingrained in their stories.

The life story question was presented to all entrepreneurs in the beginning and asked them to tell their life stories from the day they were born up until the interview. They were assured that every detail that was important to them mattered to me as well. After their responses, which varied significantly in length from about 4 minutes to 28 minutes, they were asked a couple of questions about how they
experienced growing up as a woman in the Northeast, political aspirations and their living situations among others.

The expert interviews were semi structured and lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. The questions varied according to their field of expertise.

4.4 Focus Group and Observations

During a joint workshop of the Indian Institute of Entrepreneurship (IIE) and the German development agency GIZ several focus group interviews took place. One of these interviews was concerned with the major barriers for established female entrepreneurs in the Northeast. I had a support role representing GIZ and apart from me one representative of the IIE was present as well as about 20 female entrepreneurs from the Northeast. The focus group lasted for about an hour and was recorded in writing.

During the fieldwork in Assam and Manipur I kept a research diary in which I wrote down my observations during the interviews as well as during other occasions. Generally it was striking how the fact of recording influenced the way and the topics that interviewees talked about. When I had finished all my questions and I did not expect any more information to come, I usually thanked them for their time and stopped the recording. After that we talked a bit more freely – a lot of the time about the same topic - and the interviewees seemed to be more open especially when talking about delicate topics such as sexual harassment.

Table 3. List of interviewed entrepreneurs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sector</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anjali</td>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>Handloom, Cosmetics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deepa</td>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>Natural resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gita</td>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>Jewellery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indira</td>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>Jewellery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manjula</td>
<td>20-29</td>
<td>Food processing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parvati</td>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>Clothing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rashmi</td>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>Accessories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susmita</td>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>Food processing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. List of interviewed experts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Government Official</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women's Rights Activist</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women Entrepreneurship Organisation</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender Expert in the Development Sector</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.5 Analysis of the Empirical Data

All interviews were described and subsequently coded with the program NVIVO 12 which allows to categorize the material according to identified themes. Following the Gioia-Method (Gioia et al. 2013). Around 20 different topics were found in the first step of the analysis, which were then subsumed into 6 themes to allow a more structured analysis. The themes were roughly divided along the different parts of the life stories or along categories such as family life, ideas about the future or safety of women in India and then in the second stage allocated to theoretical concepts that directly relate to the research questions (Table 5). All quotes presented have been cleaned in terms of spelling and grammar for readability purposes but their substance has not been altered.

Table 5. Overview over identified themes and theoretical concepts, which will guide the analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identified Themes</th>
<th>Theoretical concepts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Life Story</td>
<td>Institutional context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growing up as a Woman in the Northeast</td>
<td>Empowerment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Life</td>
<td>Emancipation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment, Work and its Challenges</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics and Society</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.6 Positionality and Ethics

This thesis adopts a constructivist approach in the sense that meaning is socially constructed and “reality is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context.” (Crotty 2014, p.42). Thus the relationship of entrepreneurship and women empowerment in this case is understood as a social construct produced by humans and hence only existent within a social context.

This entails that as a researcher I am not objective or aperspectival (Daston 1992). Being born and socialized in Western Europe has shaped my views and perspective and thus influenced the whole study. Underlying bias may have contributed to the choice of questions and since conducting face to face interviews my personality or perception as a white male might have led to the creation of specific outcomes that were not intended.

According to the Swedish Research Council (2017) there are many rules and regulations on national and international level that apply as soon as personal data is being used for research. I assured all participants anonymity and to protect the personal data of the interviewees their names have been exchanged with aliases in this thesis and the experts are only addressed by their roles. All participants were informed about these procedures before the interviews through one information sheet (Appendix 2) which highlighted the purpose of the study as well as one consent form (Appendix 3) which all interviewees signed.

4.7 Limitations

A lack of time and resources posed the biggest limitation on the study especially regarding the number of interviews and the inability to access different societal groups. Due to a lack of language skills in either Assamese or Hindi the choice of interviewees was limited to entrepreneurs and experts who were fluent in English. In two instances the interviews were partially done via an interpreter to bridge the language barrier. This allowed me to only interview women with a high level of education, most of
them had undergone tertiary education, which excluded the perspectives of less privileged entrepreneurs. Additionally all interviews were conducted within the cities of Guwahati and Imphal, so the situation of rural entrepreneurs was only captured through secondary sources as experts and literature.

Furthermore I sometimes had the impression that recording would inhibit the women entrepreneurs from talking freely about certain topics, which they would talk about as soon as I turned off the recording. This might have led to a more optimistic outlook within the interviews, but I tried to include everything in my personal observations, which complement the interviews as data sources.
5. Results

In this section the empirical material gathered which is relevant to this study will be elaborated. In the course of the fieldwork different methods have been used to obtain the data. Starting with a focus group interview in December 2018 which was concerned with the barriers for women entrepreneurship in the Northeast and then taking into account 8 semi structured life-narrative interviews with female entrepreneurs during January 2019. To triangulate the data and have different perspectives on the topic 4 interviews with experts were undertaken: A high-ranking government official dealing with entrepreneurship in the Northeast, one representative of a women’s entrepreneurship organisation, one gender expert within the development sector in India and one women’s rights activist. Additionally, own observations made during the field work are considered.

The focus group interview and the expert interviews will introduce the institutional setting within Northeast India in terms of the general situation of women, the barriers for women entrepreneurs and the issues around women empowerment. After that, key themes that have been identified within the life narrative interviews with the entrepreneurs are compiled to display how women entrepreneurs act within their regional context.

5.1 Focus Group

It became apparent during the focus group session that the entrepreneurs experienced a variety of challenges which were faced by almost all of them. One big problem was that it was difficult for them to acquire financing, mostly through a lack of collateral and that they needed more knowledge about different financial products. Additionally, awareness of government schemes which support entrepreneurs was very limited and most of them did not know which sources they could use and even if they were granted government subsidies these were often substantially delayed. Most of them had difficulties to scale up their businesses from a certain point and noted that they lacked mentorship in these aspects.

To overcome these challenges, they proposed several ideas that could mitigate problems and help them run and grow their businesses. To cope with the enormous stress that a lot of them experienced, which led to a suicide of one young female entrepreneur, they proposed the establishment of a mental health support system. Furthermore since it was difficult for them to scale up their businesses, they were asking for mentoring especially with helping to change the mindset to “think big” and develop a long-term plan for growth.

5.2 Expert Interviews

The focus group introduced a few mostly business-related barriers which the entrepreneurs have to face. The following expert interviews will add to these and also complement with insights into the situation for women in the Northeast and the whole of India. Since all of the experts have a different angle on women’s entrepreneurship, the questions were tailored according to their area of expertise.

5.2.1 Government Official

Answering who benefits from his institution he talked about 3 different levels of activity. First at the grassroots level for initial stage entrepreneurs, then with established entrepreneurs who have difficulties scaling up their businesses and also newly emerging startups. Male as well as female entrepreneurs are being supported and upon till now there is no specific gender strategy in place, which is planned to be changed in the future.
He sees benefits for the status of women in becoming entrepreneurs. Through an own income they are able to increase the living standards of the household and can thus enact more within household decisions. But talking about the significance of these changes he admits that there are huge obstacles for women to tackle if they want to start their own businesses. Especially in rural settings they have to get the permission from their husbands or fathers to be able to work and mostly that is only possible after they have taken care of all the household duties, thus leaving them not a lot of time to dedicate to their businesses. This leads to immobility and thus makes it hard for women to get a regular job, sell their products at markets, attend workshops to enhance their skills or go to banks and apply for loans. Especially the access to finance is difficult for women since banks generally do not have gender specific products, hence they are asking for collateral to give out a credit which women usually do not have because real estate or similar valuable assets are mostly owned by men. Thus there is only the chance for microfinance which allows them to start a business, but they cannot scale up and therefore not really change the income situation within their household or renegotiate the current power structure. Another problem is the lesser literacy because girls drop out of school earlier than boys and hence often lack numerical skills that are crucial particularly when scaling up a business.

Next to these business-related constraints for women there are social barriers which disempower them. He talks about a generally patriarchal system with varied levels of oppression and observes that even Manipur where women are more economically empowered than in other Northeastern states their influence in the political sphere is still negligible. Another thing are the prevalent social norms of gender division of labour. He argues that it is probably not so difficult for a woman to convince her husband to work 2-3 hours next to her household duties, but as soon as she would work full time and could actually earn more than him it would be less likely that he would give his permission. Generally he perceives the Northeast being more gender equal than the rest of India. He attributes that to the lesser importance of the feudalist caste structure and to the huge percentage of indigenous groups in which traditionally the women had more say. Also in urban settings women are more literate, do not face the same magnitude of oppression than women in small remote villages.

To support the women and their businesses, he is planning on designing a gender specific intervention which will cater more to the specific needs of women. He believes that economic activity of women will benefit their lives and their families but remains skeptical about the possibilities of empowerment through entrepreneurship. He concludes:

“Until and unless there is, let’s say a counter social movement taking place to foster this one…I think entrepreneurship alone will probably not be able to make a significant impact.”

5.2.2 Women’s Rights Activist

She works with the rights of indigenous people and also with women’s rights in Manipur. She describes the situation for women Manipur as:

“If you look at it from a superficial angle, it would seem as if like the women in Manipur are empowered and they are more visible and things like that. But, I mean when you actually dissect it and look at it, there is a lot of underlying patriarchy “

She goes on in explaining that although there is a market exclusively used by women and that women are economically very active compared to other parts of India, that they are oppressed in many ways. But not all women are allowed to work, and a widespread problem is that husbands control the incomes of their wives and use it for their own means. This often leads to cases of domestic violence if a woman refuses to hand out the money to her husband. Also there are societal values that condemn women drinking or smoking in public, having premarital sex or just being seen with men or boys in public.

She regards female entrepreneurship as beneficial for women empowerment but also remarks that in a lot of cases working in their own businesses just adds to their household work and can lead to stress and exhaustion because she might be expected to do all the chores at home and additionally earn some
money for the family. It is relatively easy for women to set up a business but scaling up is a challenge since men often view women as too soft for business and policies as well as social customs hinder women to play a bigger part in the business community. Thus women own mostly small-scale enterprises in the handicraft or food sector, although there are a couple of young entrepreneurs who recently started setting up export businesses.

Talking about the safety of public spaces for women she acknowledges that there are less cases of sexual harassment and rape compared to other parts in India and mentions a woman NGO the ‘Meira Paibis” (“torch bearers”) whose members mostly consist of elderly women who patrol the streets at night to keep them safe for women. However she points out that they are not a feminist organisation and have a lot of traditional values which can also endanger women:

“With regards to sexual harassment, they will be the ones to save you. But if it’s like you are hanging out with your boyfriend or if there is some public display of affection or if you are caught in a compromising position, then they will forcibly marry you to the guy immediately.”

Forced marriages are also common in case a woman gets pregnant and rape is legitimized if a woman gets raped by her husband.

In the State Assembly of Assam only 2 of 60 seats are occupied by women and even the women who are in the assembly are often related to one of the ministers and act in their behalf. A lot of women regard politics as “a very dirty game” and thus do not want to get involved. She expresses concern about this dismissal of politics by a lot of women but says that the younger generation seems to be more interested in politics and try to change the status quo.

5.2.3 Women’s Entrepreneurship Organisation Representative

She works with a Northeast based organisation which supports women entrepreneurs through skills development, networking and documentation. Regarding the situation of women in the Northeast she states that they are in a better position than in the rest of India but still behind compared to men although the situation is improving. Her grandmother was completely illiterate, her mother received basic education and could read and write and she herself graduated from university, which she sees as an overall trend within the Northeast. She also describes inequalities concerning the distribution of property in favour of sons and a subsequent lack of financial independence for women in general, which leaves them most of the time dependent on their fathers or husbands. Additionally the societal focus on the primary role of a woman as caregiver hinders them in emancipating themselves from their families and scaling up their businesses:

“So even if she is one of the major contributors financially to the household, she is earning good, she is at a good position, at the North East level she is ahead. But back home, she is still that same woman who is as educated and just doing household chores.”

She argues that entrepreneurship can help women to not only gain financial independence but more importantly exposure to the outside world which they would not get in the same extent otherwise. Through networking, traveling, negotiating with customers and business partners they get new perspectives on life and broaden their horizons. Thus their mindsets can change and they can start thinking about alternatives to the status quo for their lives. She goes on explaining that the endurance of domestic violence through women is not mainly a phenomenon prevalent in rural settings with a lack of education but more based on the woman’s perception that she is dependent on her husband. Hence entrepreneurship could play a beneficial role in that context as well.

She sees a positive development for women in the Northeast in the future. The number of female entrepreneurs is rising steadily for years and there are more than two thousand government schemes aimed at supporting women, although she acknowledges, that those are often poorly implemented and thus do often not have a lot of impact. Another problem is the poor political representation of women at state level. She says that it is difficult for women to work in the political setup because of the
general lack of regard for women among political leaders, which creates a hostile environment for women to work in.

5.2.4 Gender Expert in the Development Sector

She works as a gender expert within an international development agency and has worked with gender issues in different contexts in India for over twelve years.

In general she regards gender equality in India as far-fetched but acknowledges that there are improvements, especially within the last 15 years which enhanced the lives of many women. She starts by addressing reasons for gender inequality which she sees as deeply rooted within cultural practices, such as dowry system, which requires the parents of the bride to pay a certain price to the family of the groom after the wedding. This custom is often regarded as one of the reasons for female infanticide, gender specific abortions and a distorted sex ratio, which is quite common in many Indian states, since parents prefer having a son over a daughter. But even after birth the child mortality for girls is much higher since the nutritional and medical needs are often met to a lesser extent than to the ones of boys. They do not receive the same amount of attention, often drop out of school earlier and grow up with the mindset that they are lesser human beings compared to men.

Concerning women entrepreneur ship as a tool of women empowerment she is skeptical and argues that firstly not every woman aspires to become an entrepreneur and even more importantly conditions for women in the formal and informal sector have to be enhanced and the whole paradigm of economics has to change. She explains that through the notion that only financial gain is regarded as economic success, whereas a lot of work done by women is not regarded as economic because they are not being paid for it, e.g. household work, field labour etc. Even considering only an increased income by women does not mean that they are indeed economically empowered, husbands or fathers often have control over their wives’ money or even more subtle she might herself “decide” to spend money on her parents-in-law’s welfare instead of herself and thus not really use the money to enhance her life. Additionally, focusing only on monetary value as an indicator for economic success, the value of a good work life balance, free time for herself is not accounted for and thus gives only a one-dimensional perspective on a complex issue.

Furthermore, when she addresses political representation of women, she sees no correlation between economic empowerment and a higher political representation, as in Manipur currently 58 out of 60 seats in the State Assembly are held by men. As a remedy for these types of inequality she suggests reserving a certain number of seats for women. There’s the draft of a bill which should reserve 33% of seats for women on state and national level but it has not been discussed in the lower house since 1996. This resembles the resistance against such a measure and a never-ending debate about that women must be competent enough to be elected, whereas the competency of men is seldomly addressed:

“How many of those men sitting on those seats are competent enough to even run? Most of them have criminal charges on them. We have a Parliament of over 500 members at the highest level. I know that there are through statistics that twenty five percent of them have criminal records. So what competencies are we talking about? Why is it then women have to really prove their competencies to get a chair or a seat and men don’t and nobody questions the men's power structures within the Parliament.”

Another measure could be to incentivize women to actually run for parliament, since many of them are discouraged because of the hostile environment in politics.

She acknowledges that many policies and schemes have been passed that aim at making India more gender equal, e.g. the Dowry Act, which forbids the exchange of dowry or the Sexual Harassment Workplace Act. There are also laws on equal pay for the formal sector, but the main problem is that these laws are not widely implemented. The exchange of dowry and sexual harassment are still widespread and most laws guaranteeing worker’s rights have only implications for the formal sector anyhow. Since a lot of women work in the informal sector where the circumstances are often much worse.
5.2.5 Conclusion

When summarizing and comparing the expert interviews a lot of similarities arise in their views about women empowerment and possible ways to foster it. It becomes clear that all of them see entrepreneurship as beneficial for women empowerment but in different degrees. Furthermore the need for a mindset change in regard to the position of women in society is expressed which cannot only be achieved through entrepreneurship. Widespread oppression of women exists in different societal aspects in households, public space, business and politics. But also positive change is visible at least in efforts to create or change policies, which however lack proper implementation at times.

Entrepreneurship is mostly regarded in terms of its economic benefit and add to the income of women, only the women entrepreneurship representative attributed a deeper more transformative power to this concept as it fundamentally changes the exposure of women to different parts of the world and elevates them from the confinement of their homes. To foster gender equality all experts mentioned that education could be one major contributor to a new understanding and awareness about that topic and create long lasting change.

5.3 Life Narrative Interviews Female Entrepreneurs

The expert interviews set the stage for a better understanding of the circumstances that female entrepreneurs live in. In the following section their voices will shed some light on entrepreneurship and empowerment in Northeast India. As identified in table 5, themes emerged within the analysis of the life narrative interviews which will be discussed in the following guided by the research questions:

1. How are female entrepreneurs affected by the regional institutional setting in Northeast India?
2. How do women entrepreneurs act upon these circumstances?
3. How does the concept of empowerment materialise in this case and how does it relate to existing literature?

5.3.1 Life Story

When talking about their life stories it appeared that almost all of them had been educated at least partially away from their homes, two of them even had attended colleges in the UK. The reasons for being educated elsewhere are based in the difficult political situation in Assam and Manipur, which included bomb blasts, strikes and closure of schools for extended periods.

They had different reasons for becoming entrepreneurs, from pure necessity of income and lack of alternatives to pursuing their dreams and looking for a purpose in life. What unifies them is the wish of helping others and strengthening the local community through their businesses, by generating good jobs, empowering women through self-employment or making products more environment-friendly.

Out of their narratives themes emerged which I subsumed into different categories which are featured in the following sections and shed some light on the perspectives of the women entrepreneurs.

5.3.2 Growing up as a Woman in the Northeast

All of them were mostly happy with their upbringing in the Northeast although out of different reasons, Anjali spoke very positively about growing up as a woman in the Northeast:

“It's very good. I think I am born in the best part of the world. We are really encouraged to do everything, we are not suppressed, we get a lot of help from everyone. In the other part of
India, it may not be the same but in Assam and North East, women are really encouraged to work.”

Parvati, an entrepreneur from Manipur was also happy about being born in India but out of a very different reason:

“I feel very happy that I was born a woman, also in a place like India, because a person’s character development happens when you struggle, when you fight against certain norms, certain ideas. So, the more you fight, you become better. [...] The amount of struggle that I have faced, I wouldn’t have faced all that [if she were born as a male] and that would have made me a different person. I don’t think the kind of strength that I have right now, I wouldn’t have acquired this if I was a male. So, for that I am really grateful, and I’m happy that I was born a woman.”

These were both ends of the range of responses that I received in that regard, most of them acknowledged some difficulties, but most of them had really supportive families which helped them with their education and subsequently with becoming entrepreneurs. However some anecdotes shed some light on inequal treatment of boys and girls and preference for a male child:

“So, in the earlier days, the families, they would love to have a boy child and in my family case, it was my sister first, and second another girl sister; so I have two sisters above me, and then [I am the] third, like three girls. They gave me a boy’s name, Chaoba and I used to hate it, when I was growing up. I always questioned why they called me Chaoba. I didn’t want my friends to know what my pet name is, because it’s a guy’s name and it’s not a very nice name too. Chaoba is a boy’s name commonly given to a girl child so that the next child could be a boy.”

Susmita was educated in a boarding school for girls for 12 years which had a quite extraordinary curriculum. Next to the usual subjects she would be trained in horse-riding flying airplanes and other topics which were not common for girls to undertake. The aim of this programme was to inspire confidence within the girls, that they could manage all the challenges they would face in life and that there are no jobs a woman cannot do. She mentioned that she has adopted that attitude for herself and thus felt empowered to deal with obstacles and difficulties she was confronted with.

Concerning the topic of safety for women and girls in public spaces in India most of them felt safe in the Northeast at least during the day, they described the atmosphere as relatively women friendly especially compared to other places in India like Delhi, where one interviewee would only go out with pepper spray in her purse. Several entrepreneurs experienced sexual harassment in public and reacted with physical defense. The police have special departments which only deals with violence against women, but the entrepreneurs described the police as unhelpful in these situations. Next to the safety concerns some women mentioned that they would rather not go out at night because society would view it as not appropriate for women to leave the house at night.

5.3.3 Family Life

Many things that were mentioned in the expert interviews were also present in the lives of the interviewed entrepreneurs. One of them told that her husband is not helping with household chores, so when she started her business it was very hard for her because she had to take care of all the housework. Now she works 12 to 13 hours a day and has domestic helpers for the chores. When she started her business, she thought it was not surprising that her husband was not very confident in the enterprise and regarded it as way of keeping herself busy, because he had enough income to support the family. For her it was not about the money but to have a purpose and to succeeded in business. She had to travel a lot and was not able to do so when her son was young since her husband did not play
any role in taking care of the child. Since her son went to boarding school and now to university she feels freer.

But not all accept the traditional division of labour. Parvati mentioned that the household work is divided by her and her mother-in-law, which she does not accept and thus has arguments with her husband. She tries to convince him to generally take up some of the chores but explains that traditionally the daughter in law is expected to do all the chores even when she is working. However, her husband started to change his behaviour and helps with some of the chores due to her refusing to take up all the work.

When she wanted to go to an accounting class in the morning but believed not to be able to because she had to prepare breakfast for the family in the morning, her mother-in-law enabled her to go by stepping in for her, which she considers to be very open-minded. People told her how lucky she is with having her as a mother-in-law. She thinks it just highlights how unsupportive other mothers-in-law are and how badly they treat their daughters-in-law and that her mother-in-law is a very normal, decent person. After marriage the daughter-in-law has to “take care of everything”, which includes cooking, cleaning, grocery shopping and planning events and festivities etc.

Rashmi an entrepreneur from Manipur described her daily schedule within the household of her in-laws:

“See, for example, in first morning, we worship and then we go to the kitchen for a breakfast and serve all member of the families and then we have to prepare lunch. After completing this work, almost we finish at around one o’clock. So, after that its free time. Until three or four. After four pm, I have to clean this worship place and then we have to worship again. And then we have to prepare for the dinner”

So she only has around three or four hours a day where she can focus on her business and if she does, there is no time for leisure or other activities. Also, she did not want to get married before she set up her business in a properly manner but because of the suitability of certain months for marriage in Hindu tradition she had to get married at that point, although she wanted to focus on her business at that time. Before and after marriage she feels restricted by customs and had to ask for permission from her parents-in-law to attain for the interview. Additionally, she was never allowed to go out at night without her husband or not at all before marriage, which she accepts as she says that it is dangerous for women to be out after dark in India.

Concerning family planning Parvati expressed that she would like to have children someday and that she would like to break with traditional gender roles when raising them:

“So, I’ve already set ground rules that both the children - doesn’t matter if it’s a girl or a boy; we plan to have two; so, when they are old enough to eat with their own hands, they will wash their own dishes. The sister will not take away the brother’s plate after he eats. He will also go wash his own dish. The change has to come from us... from the parents, only then you can teach your children certain values.”

5.3.4 Empowerment, Work and its Challenges

All of them enjoyed their work and expressed a sense of purpose which they received from working in their own businesses. Some mentioned explicitly how being an entrepreneur changed their status in the society and that it became an important part of their identity, Anjali remarked about her successful career in cosmetics:

“All the branches and we have like forty, fifty branches, my photograph was up there. So, everybody knew who Anjali was. So, it was like really something that recognition. Now, everybody knows me, you know before I was somebody’s wife, somebody’s mother, now I am
Anjali. [...] It really feels good because you don’t have to be known as somebody’s wife, it’s good to be somebody’s wife but then I have my own entity now.

Empowering women through the creation of jobs was also a part in most of their agendas. Susmita had built up a supply network of over 200 women that process food in their kitchens, then deliver it to her factory, where it gets packaged and then sold under the name of her brand. Thus she enables the women to work from home and generate income. She provides training workshops in food processing, not only for women that work for her but also in cooperation with NGOs. Next to that she also organizes leadership trainings for women and is founder of a women entrepreneurship organisation.

Having been educated at a boarding school that inspired confidence in girls to be able to achieve whatever they want, she tries to inspire women in the same way and trains them to operate the machines in the factory and other jobs that would usually be done by men. She employs only women apart from their drivers because she could not find any female drivers.

Now she sees herself in being in a comfortable position as her business is widely respected and even exporting internationally. But she noted that it was difficult to achieve the current business size and success due to a business environment, that does not treat women as equal partners but does not take them seriously. When applying for her first loans she would not go to the bank alone but with some of her staff to make clear that the loan would not be for her personal enjoyment but for a solid business. She faced the same challenges when her business grew and she started to interact with business partners who she did not know personally before. She attributes the difficulties for women to scale up their businesses mostly to the hostile and male dominated work environment and the challenges with finance. What helped her at the start was that she could gather the initial capital from friends and family members.

Gita had problems with her mother-in-law in the beginning of having moved in with her in-laws. She could not understand why Gita would go to work every day and expected her to stay at home. To resolve the issue Gita tried to show her mother-in-law what she was doing:

“If you want to grow, you don’t be rebellious, you’ll have to make your environment also grow with you. You’ll have to educate your environment. So, I started showing my mother-in-law how women were coming from different cities and doing exhibitions, how they were working, how women were going to other places and seeing, how they work in a corporate sector. So, she started accepting it and now she supports me a lot.”

All of the interviewed entrepreneurs had several employees and had at times problems with finding acceptable candidates because many people prefer to have safe government jobs and some, especially men refused to work for them. Parvati recalled having problems finding suitable employees at the start of her business:

“Not many people agreed to work under me. I was young and I was a girl. So, they thought it beneath them to work for me. I think that is another reason why there are not many men. Otherwise, I don’t give preference to a male or female. If they are talented, if they are skilled, then I hire them.”

5.3.5 Politics and Society

None of them was at present or before engaged with a political party and most did not have any interest in doing so. The current governmental and political system was often regarded as corrupt, so most women wanted to focus on their businesses, through which they thought to have better chances in impacting society for the better. Parvati described the struggle of government employees:

“So, what happens here is we have to pay a certain amount of bribe and then you get a government job. They are caught in this vicious circle. So, you pay a bribe, then you get the job, then you work your whole life trying to make up for the amount of money you have paid,
because government jobs don’t pay much. So, it’s like a vicious circle. You get a job, then you take bribe from other people and you try to make up for the money that you have spent.”

Manjula mentioned that if she could change anything about the government she would increase the overall accountability since she felt that the government has sufficient funds at its disposal, but the money would often not reach the claimed destination, which leads to improper implementation of projects and general shortcomings of infrastructure.

Although most of them acknowledged the importance of parliamentary decision making and expressed the need for more women in political positions but just one had concrete plans of engaging in politics through becoming a MP in the upcoming elections to increase gender equality, the life of the poor and the management of the yearly reoccurring floods.

For Parvati the most pressing challenge in society is women empowerment, she attributed a string of benefits to the achievement of gender equality:

“I think once that’s solved, this vast difference in the role of a woman and the role of the men in society, the crime rates will go down, the pay gap structure in offices, in business would go down. The role of a woman in the household activities would also obviously go down which would mean that she would be more productive in office, which would again affect the economy of the society as a whole.”

5.3.6 Future

When talking about the future all of the women were optimistic and confident about their businesses. Anjali expressed her confidence quite clearly:

“I feel future is bright. If I work hard, nobody can stop me, but I need to work hard. Every day you run your [from the] beginning, you start afresh and then you carry on forward. So, I feel future will be very good.”

Others mentioned that they could expand their brands and open new stores, connect their products to new markets and employ more people and grow their business. Also having a good impact on the community seemed to play a role for most of them, Parvati claimed:

“I hope to be bringing some kind of positive change in the society at large, the society of Manipur. I don’t want to be... obviously it’s a business, I want to make profit, but I want to be contributing something to the society as well.”

5.4 Observation and Conclusion

Before coming to Northeast India my only reference regarding women empowerment in Northeast India were news articles (Guardian 2018; Hindustan Times 2019; etc.) and academic literature which painted a bleak picture of women’s struggle for a decent life (Nayak & Mahanta 2008; Bhattacharyya 2015; Kalokhe et al. 2017 etc.). Additionally having lived in Delhi for about 3 months at that time made me aware of significant gender differences in India, e.g. not seeing a lot of women in public spaces and virtually none after dark, as well as stories of women who talked about a huge gender gap in India etc. So I was really surprised when I attended the IIE Workshop and got in contact with the entrepreneurs for the first time. I was impressed by their confidence, the energy they radiated when they talked about their businesses and the anger they expressed when it came to injustices.

The contrast between literature and expert interviews on the one hand which created a desolate image of the situation of women in India and being there talking to them was tremendous. During the one on one interviews I talked to deeply motivated women who really cared about their businesses, their
families and their communities and not one of them seemed to accept or succumb to the limits that society traditionally imposed on women. Only a few of them questioned the patriarchal system directly and wanted to change it whereas most of them seemed to focus on enhancing the life situation of their communities and help other women through providing jobs for them. One entrepreneur told me that she does not believe that gender inequality has a lot of impact. She argued that power and oppression do not originate from men but rather that the divide is between rich and poor. This resonated also in the stories of other entrepreneurs, of which some stated that women and men are equal. In general the stark contrast between literature and experts on the one hand and the presence of seemingly empowered women on the other remained in my view throughout the study.

One thing that was mentioned by experts and literature (Limbu & Bordoloi 2015) alike was a huge urban / rural gap, meaning that women in urban areas are comparatively better off, having more freedom, better education and less gender-based constraints than women in rural areas. Also all the women I interviewed had a high level of education and often came from relatively wealthy backgrounds. These might be reasons for the seemingly vast gap between literature and observations.
6. Discussion

So far, the theoretical framework for the concepts of empowerment, entrepreneurship and their application and meaning in different regional contexts has been presented. After that the empirical findings of this study have been portrayed and subsumed in categories. In the following section the findings in the academic literature are juxtaposed to the results of this study and discussed, guided by the research questions.

6.1 The regional institutional setting in Northeast India and how entrepreneurs act upon these circumstances

“So, what can you expect when the gods you worship are undressing women in mythological stories? Like Krishna, the guy who plays the flute, he used to steal women’s clothes and hide in the tree. So, this kind of gods we pray to. So you can’t expect too much, you know”

– Parvati, entrepreneur

Literature and interviews revealed that gender inequality is prevalent in Northeast India as in other parts of the world. There is a preference for male children, which shows the deeply ingrained set of patriarchal values inherent in the society. Especially being expected to take care of the household duties and raising of the children make it difficult for women to work in standard 9 to 5 jobs. Which led some of the interviewees to becoming entrepreneurs. This is what Kabeer (1999) aims at when she talks about the concept of choice and under which circumstances the choice can be considered as being made ‘freely’, since there are not necessarily viable alternatives available to becoming an entrepreneur.

The incompatibility of fulltime work and fulfilling the traditional role as a homemaker and mother makes lives of women entrepreneurs difficult. The interviewees reacted differently to these imposed duties: Some accepted them like Rashmi and thus had a very busy schedule having to prepare all the meals and in between running their businesses, others had supportive families, which helped them with their tasks or employed domestic workers who take care of the households.

Only one woman openly resisted to be fully responsible for all household duties and negotiated with her husband about the responsibilities in their home. So in general entrepreneurship did not seem to have a big impact on questioning the domestic gender roles, the entrepreneurs managed the situation but mostly on their own expense or the work put in by another female member of their family. Apart from one interviewee none reported that their husband helped with the chores and when asked, “why not?” the question often seemed absurd to them.

Hence being able to manage household and business without questioning power structures would mean empowerment according to Inglis (1997) but not emancipation. So it seemed that the entrepreneurial activity of women would in this case not alter power relations but rather empower them within the system, so that they could outsource this work to (probably female) domestic workers or their female relatives.

Entrepreneurs showed significant resistance to some patriarchal norms, e.g. the division of labour at the workplace. One woman expressed clearly that she believed that women could do all jobs men can do and thus trained her female staff in working with heavy machinery in her factories. So she clearly emancipated herself from this traditional paradigm of what a woman’s position is and through redefining the role of women in the workplace and also acting on this belief she started changing the common held assumption of “women as non-economic agents” (Hamilton 2013, p. 94).

This resonates well with the findings of Alkhaled & Berglund (2018) in their research about women entrepreneurs in Saudi Arabia and Sweden who found empowering practices in their life stories in offering employment opportunities to women, forming women networks, providing skill trainings etc.
This stretch of traditional boundaries towards more freedom for women to work constitutes resistance against the current power structures, at least on a micro-level and creates awareness as well as future role models for women in the work force, which could lead to inspiration of others. As Kabeer (1999) mentions that to make a free choice the alternatives have to be perceived within the realms of reality, pioneers such as women working with heavy machinery can change the perception of what is possible for future generations of girls.

Lack of access to finance was reported by experts and literature alike as one major challenge for women, which also resonated with the responses in the focus group. It seemed to be somewhat difficult to be able to obtain loans or even know which government schemes or financial products are available. Apart from micro finance banks, there are no gender specific financial products designed for the use of women. Which leads to difficulties for women to scale up their businesses since micro loans are not sufficient and most commercial banks do not take women entrepreneurs seriously in a business context.

That meant that the female entrepreneurs had to apply other strategies to get their businesses going and growing. Some managed to save money from working abroad in previous jobs, some received the funds from family and friends. One entrepreneur told that she would never go alone to a bank but always followed by staff members, to demonstrate a certain importance to the bank personnel. This made her successfully receive loans, but at a stage when her business already had reached a considerable size.

This method of taking some followers to a bank to increase the chance of being taken seriously is described by Alkhaled & Berglund (2018) as a successful means to negotiate with financial institutions. In their case female entrepreneurs in Sweden are given a male follower by a female entrepreneur network to achieve being perceived as a business partner.

It shows that the women have to put significantly more effort in acquiring finance and displays the dependence on others for receiving loans etc., but also highlights the ability of creatively dealing with the imposed obstacles and fighting for their businesses. A special role in this context play so-called self-help groups (SHG) which are collectives of women that amongst other activities vouch for each other’s loans so that banks are more inclined to granting loans to women who in a lot of cases do not have any form of collateral.

Some acts or statements of the entrepreneurs revealed assumptions held which could be classified as ‘status-quo-thinking’. One entrepreneur stated that in the beginning of her entrepreneurial activities her husband ‘obviously’ did not have a lot of faith in her success. This shows how deeply ingrained some assumptions about women in business are, even among female entrepreneurs themselves. Which Kabeer (1999) addresses as unconscious beliefs that can, when it comes to choices, have a significant impact on which alternative seems to be possible.

A lot of entrepreneurs did not see themselves as being disempowered. Some stated that gender equality has been reached in the Northeast and that women are free to do whatever they want. One said it was more the economic differences between rich and poor than gender inequality which constitute power structures. Considering the successful businesses a lot of them operated and the degree of freedom that they reached within their personal lives it is hard to argue against that. But it leads inevitably to reproducing old gender stereotypes. Neglecting blatant inequalities does not lead to an awareness of the full scale of the problem and can create even more problems for women, making them think it is their personal fault for not succeeding, whereas gender inequalities definitely play a huge role in obstructing women’s lives.

However this does not necessarily mean that gender inequalities are the biggest determining factor for inequalities in general. Given that some of the women had gathered tremendous power in their immediate environment, some employing more than one hundred people. What most of them have in common is that they are relatively privileged, compared to most women in the Northeast. Some of them have graduated colleges abroad, none of them was illiterate or said that they had suffered from scarcity of food or other basic needs.
This aligns with statements of experts who claimed that there is a huge urban/rural divide in gender equality and that wealth plays a huge part in the development of women’s lives. Which leads to the question of entrepreneurship offering empowerment for whom and under which conditions. Do rural women who work in a self-employed setting for a few hours a day enjoy the same benefits compared to the interviewed, very successful entrepreneurs or is it just an addition to their workload?

6.2 How does the concept of empowerment materialise in this case and how does it relate to existing literature?

The portrayed entrepreneurs were all coping well within the existing power relations, most of them had achieved a high level of individual freedom and employed several people in their businesses. Literature in other contexts has presented similar success stories of female entrepreneurs in different settings (Alkhaled & Berglund 2018; Barragan et al. 2018; etc.).

Using men as followers to be able to receive loans and being accepted in the business community could be seen as a form of temporary emancipation. Barragan et al. (2018) found similar micro-emancipatory acts in their study of women in the United Arabian Emirates, where women had to strategically seduce men to be able to run their businesses. These acts were acknowledged to challenge men’s power and allow the women to gain personal freedom to some extent without necessarily transforming this new achieved freedom into long-lasting societal change. Alkhaled & Berglund (2018) judged these efforts as empowering, but most likely in an Inglisian (1997) understanding of empowerment and not as a society transforming process.

Current literature about Northeast India and entrepreneurship does not problematize empowerment, entrepreneurship and the linkage, it is optimistic about the empowerment potential of entrepreneurship and does not take into account adverse effects of entrepreneurship for the women involved (Das 2012; Pandey 2015; Limbu & Bordoloi 2015), e.g. promoting women to work from home could lead to an increased workload where women have to add the income generating activities to their already busy household duty schedule.

Additionally promoting entrepreneurship could continue valuing only income generating work with dismissing all the other duties that mostly women perform every day to keep their families fed and healthy and thus reinforcing the prevalent image of women as “non-economic agents” (Hamilton 2013, p. 94). Also entrepreneurship is a comparatively high-risk endeavour. There is no social security involved as would be in formal employment. Additionally, entrepreneurship seems to be perfectly fitting to the status quo status of women, just adding some work in their free time. It is in that regards not a way to strive for change and for example create child care facilities, so that women could participate equally in normal work life or question the traditional division of household chores but could lead to even more pressure on women if they are expected to generate income as well as take care of children and home.

In that regard this thesis contributes a more balanced view of the chances and limitations of women’s empowerment in Northeast India in terms of the quality of empowerment. Quality here being used in the literal translation of “qualitas” referring to the innate properties and making a distinction between being able to live well within the current system and creating long term transformation of societal institutions. In this sense it can be seen as an exploring study which does not necessarily answer a lot of questions but opens up a new base for further studies, which could conduct research on a broader base, especially focusing on the rural/urban divide and also taking quantitative measures into account which could complement qualitative interviews and lead to a better understanding of empowerment processes in this dynamic region.
7. Conclusion

This thesis has portrayed the institutional setting of Northeast India in which women entrepreneurs operate, how they act in relation to the surrounding conditions and how empowerment materialises within their lives.

It is difficult to make generic assumptions about complex issues like the relationship of empowerment and entrepreneurship and this study makes no attempt in generalizing its findings. They are very context-specific and do not necessarily apply in other geographical contexts. However it provides new insights to the life situations of female entrepreneurs in Northeast India and how entrepreneurship relates to empowerment within their context.

Generally entrepreneurship seems to be an ambiguous phenomenon, which on the one hand allows women in some cases to escape the confinements of their homes, increases their economic and social status, gives them purpose and inspires confidence. The entrepreneurs interviewed all provided income opportunities for other women, in some cases in jobs that were previously done only by men, which changes the acceptance of women working and thus challenges the status quo. Meeting these inspiring women full of energy and confidence it seems hard to not believe in the transforming potential of entrepreneurship. The entrepreneurs interviewed were acting in empowered ways, actively resisting traditional customs and most of them were able to establish successful businesses, which enabled them to spend their time according to what they thought was important.

However, most of the women interviewed seemed to be coming from relatively prosperous and educated backgrounds which opens up the question of how much social class and empowerment go hand in hand. The experts mentioned huge gaps between rural and urban entrepreneurs. I was not able to conduct interviews with rural entrepreneurs due to lack of language skills in Assamese and insufficient resources to hire an interpreter. Without being able to take their stories into account it remains unclear to which extent class and wealth play a role in women’s empowerment.

In any case this thesis aimed at exploring the regional setting and building the foundation for future research since there were not many academic publications available in the English language which properly conceptualise empowerment and entrepreneurship in the regional context of Northeast India.

Future research could look into the intersectionality of gender, class and empowerment, especially taking into account the stories of rural women. This could lead to a better understanding of how empowerment is impacted by wealth and education. Furthermore the potential of entrepreneurship having adverse effect on women’s lives should be studied and to what extent the reliance on entrepreneurship as a means of women’s empowerment is justified, in relation to other measures as making the job market more accessible to women.

So is entrepreneurship beneficial for women’s empowerment?

Considering the presented literature and interviews it seems like women are able to achieve strong personal gains through entrepreneurship and also be able to renegotiate the immediate circumstances they live in through an enhanced position. They in some cases even push societal boundaries of what constitutes acceptable behaviour of women in their favour and change the perception of gender norms. Stating these tendencies it seems only natural to promote female entrepreneurship as a means of empowerment. However, it has to be mentioned that the impact on overall society is probably not equally great. It appears that the redefinition of gender roles is more or less limited to a work context and does not induce a stronger political representation of women or a public debate about women’s rights.

Thus entrepreneurship in itself is probably helpful to enhance some women’s lives. Promoting it for every woman as a means to change fundamental gender inequalities is inadequate and does not address the complexity of empowerment. Too much focus on entrepreneurship can hence have adverse effects in a sense that other important issues as bringing women into formal employment and positions of political representation or educating about gender and equality could be less regarded.
To what extent can women’s entrepreneurship be seen as a means for women’s empowerment in Northeast India?

In general the impact of entrepreneurship on women’s empowerment in the Northeast seems to be overrated by some scholars, especially when it comes to assumed spillover effects e.g. into the political sphere. Even the government official acknowledged a somewhat limited effect of women’s entrepreneurship on the foundational values of the society. Despite that it became evident that the women entrepreneurs felt empowered and confident through their work.

Finally, taking into account observations, interviews and literature its seems that entrepreneurship has its limitations in its function as a vehicle for women empowerment in the Northeast, given the strong traditional values, which lead to the discrimination of women. So its emancipatory potential according to Inglis (1997) is somewhat limited. However, it seems to have a variety of positive effects on women in that area and experts as entrepreneurs alike, were seemingly convinced of the beneficial impact of entrepreneurship. So in conclusion it seems that supporting entrepreneurship in that region is not able to transform society on a macro level but can help women in their immediate surroundings to live a more self-determined life. Thus not entrepreneurship itself seems to be that problematic, but the over-reliance on its transformative potential of society.
8. Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor for the great breakfast sessions, feedback and her constant support. The comments from my subject reviewer really helped me tying everything together.

This thesis would not have been possible without all the great help I received in India. I’m full of gratitude for all the amazing help and support I received. I especially want to thank Hiranyamayi for great company and help with the early stages of my fieldwork, as well as M. for introducing me to the entrepreneurs. Thanks to E. for setting up all my interviews in Manipur and for the great tea. Thank you, Julia, for taking me to the workshop in Assam and thanks Verena for your comments and support.

At last thanks to the experts who helped me understand entrepreneurship and the situation of women in the Northeast and to all the inspiring entrepreneurs, who took their time to give me an interview.
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Appendix 1

TABLE 1. Social indicators of women's empowerment: measuring women's participation and rights in civil, political, socio-economic, and cultural domains

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Socio-demographic indicators</td>
<td>Life expectancy at birth (years, female/male)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Sex ratio (female/male)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Average female age at first marriage</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Adolescent marriage (% of female in age group 15–19 ever married)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Number of births to 1,000 women (age 15–19)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Total fertility rate (births per woman)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bodily integrity and health</td>
<td>Maternal mortality rate (per 100,000 live births)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Child mortality rate (% age 0–5, female/male)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contraceptive prevalence (% married women)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Female genital mutilation prevalence (%)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>People HIV infected (% female among adults)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sexual abuse of women (% total population)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Physical abuse against women by an intimate partner (% of adult women who have been physically assaulted by an intimate partner, in past 12 month, ever in any relationship)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy and educational attainment</td>
<td>Youth literacy rates (% ages 15–24, female/male)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adult literacy rates (% ages 15+ and over, female/male)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>School life expectancy (expected number of years of formal schooling, female/male)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Net secondary school enrolment (% female/male)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Tertiary enrolment rates, gross enrolment ration (% female/male)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Economic participation and rights</td>
<td>Adult labour force participation rate (female/male)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female share of paid labour force</td>
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<td>Unemployment rate (% female/male)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Estimated earned income</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female professional and technical workers (as % of total)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Length, amount, and source of paid maternity leave</td>
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<tr>
<td>Political participation and rights</td>
<td>Seats in parliament in Single or Lower chamber (% female)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Seats in government at ministerial level (% female)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Seats in government at sub ministerial level (% female)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female legislators, senior officials and managers (as % total)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cultural participation and rights</td>
<td>Access to computers, internet (% female/male)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Print and electronic media (number of existing feminist resources)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Number of women's NGOs</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Tertiary students in fine arts and humanities (as % of all tertiary students female/male)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Existence of paternity leaves (Yes/No)</td>
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<td>Museum staff (% female)</td>
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<td>Ministry of Culture decision-making staff (% female)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ratification of international legal frames for women's rights</td>
<td>Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), 1979 + Optional Protocol, 1999 (year of ratification; ratification with or without reservations)</td>
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<td>Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, 1995 (adopted, with or without reservations and interpretative statements)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), 1966 (year of ratification; with or without reservations)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), 1966 (year of ratification; with or without reservations)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Discrimination in education, 1960 (year of ratification, acceptance)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, 1984 (year of ratification; with or without reservations)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>ILO Conventions, 1958</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Discrimination in employment/occupation, 1958</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Equal remuneration for men and women for equal work, 1951</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Freedom of association and right to organise, 1948 (year of ratification).</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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Information Sheet
Project Working Title: “Women Entrepreneurs in Northeast India”

Name of Researcher: Jan Matern, Uppsala University
Name of Supervisor: Rhiannon Pugh, Uppsala University

About the project:
I’m a master’s student at Uppsala University, enrolled in the programme Sustainable Development. This research project undertakes efforts to understand more about the relationship between entrepreneurial activity of women and female empowerment in the regional context of Assam and Manipur.

Your data:
The interviews will be used as a data source for a master’s thesis and potentially for subsequent scientific articles. All data will be anonymised, instead of the name of the interviewee a pseudonym will be used in the Thesis as well as any other publication. Your identity will not be shared with anyone and your personal data will be treated completely confidentially.

Your participation:
Your participation is completely voluntary and you may withdraw at any point. It will help to give new insights into a research field that has not been explored by many researchers and possibly lead to a better understanding of the situation of female entrepreneurs in Assam and Manipur.
Appendix 3

CONSENT FORM

Project Working Title: “Women Entrepreneurs in Northeast India”

Name of Researcher: Jan Matern

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.

3. I understand that any information given by me may be used in future reports, articles or presentations by the research team.

4. I understand that my name will not appear in any reports, articles or presentations.

5. I agree to take part in the above study.

________________________  ________________  ________________
Name of Participant    Date              Signature

Jan Matern              ________________  ________________
Researcher               Date              Signature

One copy will be given to the participant and the original to be kept in the file of the research team.