



ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN MADURAI THROUGH SELF HELP GROUPS

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Abstract:

"Empowerment" is a buzz word most commonly used in India today by journalists, social activities academics, politicians and people from all walks of life. Basically it expresses the desire of people who feel powerless to have more control over their life. In practical term it requires decentralization of power and authority. In short it aims at the participation of deprived sections of people, including women in the decision making process. Women, particularly in Asia, Africa and Latin America, view women's empowerment as a means to achieve an alternative future society. The view is best expressed by DAWN (Development Activities with Women for a New Era) born in 1985 as a result of the collective endeavor of individual women and women's groups from different parts of the world. Empowerment as a concept was introduced at the International Conference in 1985 at Nairobi. The conference defined empowerment as a redistribution of social power and control of resources in favour of women¹. Empowerment is the process of equipping a person or group of persons with the power towards the development. Among the various empowerment activities the role of the Self Help Groups are more significant. This paper "Economic Empowerment of Women in Madurai through Self Help Groups" deals about the Self Help Groups and its activities for the Empowerment of Women in Madurai.

Key Words: Women Empowerment, Entrepreneurs & Socio-Economic Status

Position of Women in Ancient Tamil Society:

The designing, development and introduction of different programmes by the Self Help Groups for their uplift will help Women's Economic Empowerment. From time immemorial the Indian Women especially Tamil Nadu women have not enjoyed the decision making power though they were engaged in various kinds of economic activities. Women, the passive receptacles, were invisible in the economic history of early Tamil Nadu that is during the sangam age which lasted between the period between 300 B.C and 300 A.D². There are evidences in the sangam classic about the employment of women in agricultural pursuits. They had neither little not any control over either production or distribution activities. Obviously they were engaged in different activities associated with smaller and mean pursuit of agriculture. Planting, weeding, harvesting, winnowing and protecting the ripened crops from the damages caused by birds, locusts, etc, are some of the activities carried out only by women. Besides, they also were involved in such activities like processing milk, weaving, and basket making etc³.

Generally the Sangam classic portray women as those known for their chastity, modesty and beauty etc. cilappathikaram by the Jain monk Ilango Adigal and, and Manimegalai, a Buddhist work by Seethalai Sathanar attest to the above traits as their characteristic qualities. Some of the best examples were Knnagi, Madhavi and her daughter Manimegalai. In the same way, Ahananuru and Purananum (which are included in Ettutogai i.e. Eight Anthologies), depict the various traits of Aham (inner) and Puram (outer) elements. But they had their own personal and individualistic economic involvements.

Women in Modern Period:

An awakening spread across the globe concerning the need to educate women. Thanks to the efforts of zealous Christian missionaries and the British Government. Who had established schools exclusively for girls during modern times, secular humanists and reformers too endeavored to reform the educational pattern. India has witnessed a radical shift to the approach from the Women's Welfare to Women's Development to Women's Empowerment. The Special Marriage Act of 1872, the Hindu Succession Act of 1956, the Abolition of Dowry Act of 1961 per pertaining to women whose general aim was to promote the status of women by avoiding gender disparities. But all such Acts could not solve the entire issues of women. It was also realized that the offering of more rights to women will assist of women her progress¹⁰. In this regard one has to notice the various laws passed for the betterment of women in different walks of life. They suffered a lot mainly because of the social taboos¹¹. But in the post independent period, when the concept of equality between men and women was realized, many opportunities were provided for their economic upliftment. One among such measures was the introduction of Self Help Group which stood for the uplift of the poor women of the society.

Women and Economy:

The early Tamil society was a male oriented one. As the male member was the bread winner of the family women were relegated home. They, especially the married ones, were expected to do the household work, bear and rear the children, be good hostesses remaining loyal and obedient to their better halves. They

were referred to in Sangam literature as Illal (ill+al) meaning the one who governed the houses. Were the women in the early Tamil society really given the power to administer their home? Evidences show that the women were subdued, confined to household activities and had to say in financial matters. Perhaps another meaning Illal (one who does not have anything) might have suited them. Though no measures were available to have an estimate of the economic standard of women, they were not at all rusticated from the traditional values and greater veneration was attributed to women by the Tamils⁴

It is worth to note here that the women of Vedic society were much regarded and were allowed to maintain an exalted social position⁵. But no specific references are available regarding their role in the economic order. Women did not earn through their partake in trade or productive activities⁶. Generally the matrimonial laws and customary and conventional traditions were in favour of men to deem the weaker sex as a tool for their sexual ecstatic pleasure⁷.

Over the period of time, there seems to be a change in the status of women, especially among those in the royal household. For instance, the queens of monarchs of several dynasties, committed to certain economic activities through their philanthropic deeds. Due to their economic status and access to economic activities, they contributed to temple development⁸. In the subsequent period of the Imperial Cholas, noble women of royal household also contribute to temple development⁹. The same economic status of women continued to exist. However during the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, the emphasis was laid on educating women and eradicating illiteracy among them.

Self Help Groups:

Self help group is a voluntary association of the economically backward women from a similar socio-economic background of both rural as well as urban centers. They come together for the purpose of solving their common economic and social problems through self-help and mutual help. For the empowerment of poor women and to introduce equality among the genders and also to inculcate self-confidence the Women Self- Help Group are introduced. The self help group promotes the concept of small saving among its members. Their savings are deposited in the bank in the name of the Self Help Group as a common fund. The funds collected are utilized for paying loans to the members of the group who are in the dire need of it. Generally its members should not exceed 20¹². The group will be having a common aim and specific way and means for promoting their empowerment. Evidently, thus that the women self help group is an association which functions exclusively for the uplift of women economically and socially¹³.

Self Help Group and Economic Empowerment:

Economic and social development of a country can only be meaningful when women are in the main stream of progress. It is possible through the existence Self Help Groups. Self Help Group is to empower women economically and to create large scale awareness with the active participation of women themselves. They try to achieve it through entrepreneurship. The entrepreneurship of SHG has been gaining significance for various reasons. By developing entrepreneurship among women, it is expected that nearly half of the population become productive and creative. The introduction of entrepreneurship will also be easier to the family and ultimately to the whole community. This is needed to urgently particularly in a developing country like India. The participation of women as a owner of small industry shows a very happy trend. Women participation among entrepreneurs has been 7% which is comparatively greater than their participation in Self employment. Mahalirhittam is a Tamil Nadu Development Project launched by the Tamil Nadu Corporation for development of women during 1991-1992 with support of NGO's (Non Governmental Organisation) which are functioning through network women self help group. Mahalirhittam has programmes importance to Entrepreneur Development Programme (EDP) vocational training programmes are trained in skills such as making of Agarbathis (scented sticks), bakery, book binding, goat/turkey rearing, beautician, fish farming, candle making, jute/palm, sanitary napking, greeting cards, dairy farm products, computer training, cookery, photo/video, screen printing, tailoring toy making, xerox, sericulture, paper plate making, snacks making, furtoys, terracotta product making etc¹⁴.

Entrepreneurs of Madurai:

Madurai is one of the important city in India and its is called as Temple City. Mahilthittam of Madurai Corporation gives increased importance to Entrepreneur Development Programmes (EDP) and to vocational training programme¹⁵. There are 3162 Self Help Groups in Mahlirhittam in Madurai City and 2025 Self Help Groups in Corporation. When women entrepreneurs of self help groups applied for the training in Entrepreneur Development Programmes (EDP), majority of them get the idea of starting their own business. Some of the prominent entrepreneurs in Madurai City as follow:

- ✓ Seethalakshmi, Sakthi Balaji SHG of SS Colony, Paper Cup Manufacturing.
- ✓ Pichaimani, Annaiteresa SHGs, East Marret Street, Jewel Making, Ceramic Worl, Saree Desinging, Terracotta decoration.
- ✓ Kamatchi, Deepam Sakthi SHG, Karumbalai, running X- ray shop getting training through SHG.
- ✓ T. Saroja-Bharathi women group, running the tea stall inside the collector office campus.
- ✓ P. Kasthuri, Ezhil mahaliri SHG, Thirumohur, Making Terra Cotta Products.

- ✓ K.K.Kasthuri Malligai SHG, Anna Nagar, Making Terra Cotta Products.
- ✓ R.Karpagam, Sakthimari Amman SHG, Anna Nagar, Making Terra Cotta Products.
- ✓ Muthammal, Jansirani SHG, Vandiyoor Herbal Products Making.
- ✓ Sudharani, Indira Gandhi SHG, Teppakkulam, Various dosa flours making.
- ✓ Hibiba, Roja SHG, Anna Nagar, designer of Chungadi sarees.
- ✓ Sasikala, Athiparasakthi SHG, Arapalaya, Preparing snacks¹⁶.

This women are the leading entrepreneurs of Madurai they says that SHG is the reason for their present position; they learned this business through EDP training given by the Mahalithittam the Government Organization which leads the self help groups. The scheme introduce by the Government with and intention to enhance the quality of poor people is serving meaning full purpose the major aim of the self help groups are the achievement of economic empowerment through their multi dimensional approaches. Their services in promoting the activities of the self help groups have infused sustainability among women in Tamilnadu especially in Madurai. The self help groups, by engaging themselves in varieties of projects and programmes, in a positive environment with self confidence, achieve economic stability through nontraditional enterprises in the society.

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