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Political Empowerment of Women Self Help Group Members Through Mahalir Thittam in Cuddalore District of Tamil Nadu

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ABSTRACT

Women's empowerment is a combination of policies and practices aimed at increasing women's and communities' autonomy and self-determination, allowing them to represent their own interests in a responsible and self-determined manner. A woman who is actively involved in a SHG, who is aware of her own strengths and isn't afraid to use them. The present study was conducted in Cuddalore Block of Cuddalore District. The sampling procedure applied was Proportionate random sampling with 120 respondents were selected from six villages namely Kudikadu, Pathirikkuppam, Pachayankuppam, Gunduupalavadi, Kondur, Thiruvandipuram. They were part of Mahalir Thittam project's women Self Help Groups, which were organized by Tamil Nadu Corporation for Women's Development (TNCDW). The *Overall political empowerment of women SHG members results that, nearly* half of the respondents (54.17 per cent) had medium level followed by 26.66 per cent of the high level followed by 19.17 per cent had low level of political empowerment. Majority of the members of SHG (58.33 per cent) reported that awareness of human rights as their most important measure in political empowerment followed by strong decision-making power was noticed by (51.66 per cent) and 45.83 per cent of the SHG members expressed as they had more awareness of legislation for women. The profile of Mahalir Thittam women members revealed political features, according to the conclusions of the study. The political empowerment of women Self Help Group members has received a lot of attention.

Key words: Political empowerment, Self-help group, Decision making, Leadership, Women

Tamil Nadu Corporation for Development of Women Ltd (TNCDW) was established in 1983 with the prime objective of bringing about socio-economic development and empowerment of women. The Department implements Mahalir Thittam, its flagship initiative, as well as the IFAD-assisted Post-Tsunami Sustainable Livelihoods Program. Self Help Groups (SHGs) were first introduced in Dharmapuri district in 1989 and have witnessed steady expansion since then, particularly with the introduction of Mahalir Thittam in 1997-98. It has now grown into a thriving movement that spans all of the state's districts and includes the poor and marginalized women who live on the margins of society. This programme has progressed from promoting conventional thrift and credit practices to supporting economic activities and increasing women's capacity at all levels. TNCDW has gradually implemented a wide range of concrete interventions that have had a favourable influence on women's lives.

Entrepreneurship development and income generating activities are feasible solution for empowering women.

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Economic independence is the need of the hour [1]. Empowering women through education, ideas, consciousness, mobilization and participatory approach can enable them to take their own decision, make them self-reliant and self-confident. Self Help groups (SHG'S) are homogeneous group of rural poor, members ranging between 10-20, voluntarily formed to save whatever amount they can do so from their earnings and mutually agree to contribute to a common fund of the group [2]. SHG is a group of rural poor who have volunteered to organize themselves into a group for eradication of poverty of the members. They agree to save regularly and convert their savings into a common fund [3]. The members of the group agree to use this common fund and such other funds that they may receive as a group through a common management. The self-help groups have brought about productive economic activities as well as social empowerment and capacity building of rural women [4]. It leads them to attain economic security, entrepreneurship skills, the ownership of productive assets, collective identity, social recognition and social leadership in community action and entitlement. By virtue of these, they can achieve economic, social, organizational and political empowerment [5].

Government of India has been constantly emphasizing on women development and women empowerment since independence. And also, all the state government and officials, concerned with women welfare and development are also

putting their best efforts towards this goal. Indian women have remained as one of the nation's greatest untapped resources. But it has realized that the neglect of women's power has been one of the root causes for backwardness of the country [6]. Women's empowerment is now recognized by the government as one of the most critical objectives for India's overall economic development. As a result, the Indian government now aims to empower women by elevating them in all parts of their lives, and state governments have been pushing SHGs by incorporating more women and providing attractive financial and other benefits in rural areas.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was taken-up in Cuddalore district of Tamil Nadu. Out of the thirteen blocks in Cuddalore district, Cuddalore block was selected based on the maximum number of Self-Help Groups in Cuddalore district. A sample size of 120 Self Help Group members was selected by using proportionate random sampling technique. Thirteen variables were selected for this study and they were measured by using appropriate

tools and techniques. In order to identify the empowerment level of SHG members, their responses were collected on three-point continuum viz., fully, partial and nil with the scores of 3, 2 and 1 respectively. The data were collected by using well-structured interview schedule, containing appropriate questions for bringing the required data. Percentage analysis and Cumulative frequency method were used for the analysis and interpretation of the data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Political empowerment is a process of increasing capacity for women, leading to greater choice, agency and participation in social decision making. The membership in the SHG provides the opportunity to acquire knowledge of the political affairs of the country. The perception of members of political empowerment level was measured. It could be seen from the (Table 1) that more than half of the respondents (54.17 per cent) had medium level followed by 26.66 per cent of the respondents had high level and 19.17 per cent of the respondents had low level of political empowerment.

Table 1 Distribution of respondents according to their political empowerment

| | | | (n = 120) |
|----------|--------------------|----------|-----------|
| Category | No. of respondents | Per cent | |
| Low | 23 | 19.17 | |
| Medium | 65 | 54.17 | |
| High | 32 | 26.66 | |
| Total | 120 | 100.00 | |

Table 2 Component wise empowerment level of the respondents in the dimension of political empowerment

| | | | | (n=120)* |
|--|--------|----------|------|----------|
| Political empowerment | Number | Per cent | Rank | |
| Strong decision-making power | 62 | 51.66 | II | |
| Freedom for participation in political process | 52 | 43.33 | IV | |
| Contesting in election | 46 | 38.33 | V | |
| Taking leadership position | 32 | 26.66 | VII | |
| Awareness of political institutions | 42 | 35.00 | VI | |
| Awareness of human rights | 70 | 58.33 | I | |
| Awareness of legislation for women | 55 | 45.83 | III | |
| Mean percentage | | 42.73 | | |

*Multiple responses

From the (Table 2) observed that majority of the members of SHG (58.33 per cent) had awareness of human rights as their most important measure in political empowerment. This is due the fact that TNCDW and other NGOs motivated the members by conducting various awareness development programs as to get knowledge about basic human rights and the benefits of the rights to the members as a citizen [7]. Strong decision-making power was noticed by 51.66 per cent of the members as their political empowerment aspect, this may due to the fact that SHG helps to handle issues, improves leadership skill and actively involved in *Gram Sabha* meetings. These are the regular activities of SHG members, that may develop a strong decision-making ability among the members [8].

Among the self-help group members 45.83 per cent of the self-help group members expressed as they had more awareness of legislation for women, this might be due to the reason that as per the guidance and training given by the government officials and volunteers on legal rights especially pertaining to women issues. So, the members gain an improvement of knowledge on legislation for women [9]. Apart

from the limitation of family and society, self-help group members actively involved in various political process freely due to their knowledge, education, management ability and deep understanding about their moral rights. It may be reported by 43.33 per cent of the members of self-help group [10]. Other important measures to be taken to study the political empowerment level are as follows contesting in election (38.33 per cent), awareness of political institutions (35.00 per cent) and taking leadership position (26.66 per cent). self-help groups have undoubtedly begun to make a significant contribution in poverty alleviation and empowerment of poor, especially women in rural areas of our country. Women's contributions are the vital and their empowerment would hasten the pace of social development. Investing in women's capabilities and empowering them to achieve their choices and opportunities is the definite way to contribute to the economic growth and the overall development [11].

Self-help group provides scope for the improvement of mind and development of the body of an individual. The mind accelerates the various actions of the members. Therefore, the present study has been undertaken to know political dimensions

to get empowerment of self-help groups (SHG) members. The overall political empowerment of women self-help groups (SHG) members results that, more than half of the respondents (54.17 per cent) had medium level followed by 26.66 per cent of the respondents had high level and 19.17 per cent of the respondents had low level of political empowerment [12]. Majority of the members of self-help group (58.33 per cent) reported that awareness of human rights as their most important measure in political empowerment followed by strong decision-making power was noticed by (51.66 per cent), 45.83 per cent of the self-help group members expressed as they had more awareness of legislation for women and freedom for participation in political process (43.33 per cent). Other important measures to be taken to study the political empowerment level are as follows contesting in election (38.33 per cent), awareness of political institutions (35.00 per cent) and taking leadership position (26.66 per cent).

CONCLUSION

The findings of the study on the profile of Mahalir Thittam women members indicated a differential pattern in respect of their political characteristics. This may due to that TNCDW and other NGOs motivated the members by conducting various awareness development programs as to get knowledge about basic human rights and the benefits of the rights to the members as a citizen. SHG helps to handle issues, improves leadership skill and actively involved in *Gram Sabha* meetings. These are the regular activities of SHG members that may develop strong decision-making ability among the members. SHGs also help in the financial status of the households. They have developed self-confidence and independence among rural women, which in turn increased the livelihood of the rural people. This has been much emphasized in political empowerment of women Self Help Group members.

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