

Self Help Groups and Women's Empowerment

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Abstract: *Women's empowerment is a process in which women challenge the existing norms and culture in efforts to promote their well being. This paper analyses the significance and effect of programmes by Self Help Groups (SHGs) by comparing empowerment levels before and after three years of programme intervention based on a survey conducted the city of Chennai, Tamil Nadu. The SHGs in Chennai operate under Mahallir Thittam, a state government programme funded by the Tamil Nadu Corporation for Development of Women (TNCDW). The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) empowerment indices are used to study levels of empowerment. Quantitative methodology is adopted using the self-reporting method. A three-stage stratified random sampling method was employed for data collection. The first stage involved the NGOs, the second stage focused on the SHGs and the third stage dealt with SHG members on the basis of demographics. Average and percentage were calculated to draw meaningful interpretation on the Empowerment Indicators using IFAD Model. Friedman test, Chi Square test and Anova followed by a DMRT test were used to measure the relationship between observed variables. The study revealed that levels of self-confidence and self-esteem of women increased indicating positive changes. The women in SHGs emerged as more assertive of their rights, in particular when dealing with the local community and on social matters.*

Keywords: Empowerment, IFAD, Mahallir Thittam, Self Help Groups, TNCDW and Women.

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1. Introduction

Self Help Groups (SHGs) are informal associations consisting of 10-20 members whose purpose is to enable members to reap economic benefits through mutual help, solidarity and joint responsibility. The SHGs ease availability of microcredit to women as they lack capital and have very little or no access to credits. Governments and policymakers view SHGs

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favourably but studies show mixed results. This article is a case study of Chennai (formally known as Madras), the capital city of Tamil Nadu .

In 1950, the Constitution of India was formulated and Article 14 guarantees gender equality prohibiting any form of discrimination against women. The reality however, is rampant gender inequality and discrimination in all spheres of social and economic lives of women in India. In the early decades of development planning, they were viewed as social welfare problems. The welfare assistance did nothing to eliminate social discrimination against and subordination of women. In almost all the plans for poverty alleviation and social change, disadvantaged women became a 'target' for developmental activities rather than active participants (Beijing Conference, 1996). Since 1970, policymakers and academicians have been pondering how to link development programmes with elevating the socio-economic conditions of poor women in India. Women's issues are development issues and ignoring them in development programmes means leaving almost half of the population outside development intervention (Anand, 2002).

At the grassroots level, women's participation and development often take place through interventions in the form of development programmes or projects. The participation of women in such community development programmes enhances their personal development making it more sustainable. The Government of India has introduced many community development programmes to uplift the socio economic status of women and reduce their vulnerability to poverty. One such programme was the Microcredit Self Help Groups (SHGs) established in the 1990s by the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) and supported by non-governmental agencies. Since its inception, SHGs have been under the patronage of the Central Government of India under a programme called Swarna Jayanthi Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY). It is an important poverty alleviation scheme for urban slum dwellers in India. The SGSY utilises SHGs acting as an organisational conduit that delivers subsidised assistance to households earning income that are below the stipulated poverty line. The SHGs encourage these households to take part in self-employment activities to supplement their meagre income.

The main objective of this article is to examine the role of SHGs in empowering women looking at the case study of Chennai. The research question is: Have the SHGs succeeded in empowering women? The paper addresses the issue of empowerment by looking at the beneficiaries of the programme called Mahallir Thittam, a SHG. It is one of the programmes implemented by the Tamil Nadu Corporation for Development of Women (TNCDW). It adopts the SHG approach and functions with the assistance of the International Fund of Agricultural Development (IFAD). The Mahallir Thittam programme was implemented in partnership with NGOs to help disseminate information on SHGs and to provide training and monitor their progress. The SHGs have to register with the NGOs and in turn, the latter are

to register under the Mahallir Thittam of TNCDW.¹ The SHGs play a role in uplifting the status of women by showing them ways to acquire microcredit facilities, mobilise their savings into capital and improve their skills and knowledge through various training programmes. However, literature findings show a big gap in the study of microcredit with respect to the urban poor, especially in the study area of Chennai. It is important to analyse the performance of the SHGs and their contributions to the development of urban women from the lower strata and whether women are actually empowered after joining SHGs.

2. Literature Review

Self-help groups (SHGs) form the basic constituent unit of microfinance movement in India (Chakrabarti, 2004). Experiments in various developing countries have shown that the poor can be helped by organising them into small SHGs. To address the roots of poverty, women are considered the best agents. Hence, women SHGs have become the ray of hope to developmental practitioners.

The SHGs employ a group-based approach that enables poor women to accumulate capital by way of small savings and facilitating their access to formal credit facilities (Shylendra, 1998). The concept of joint lending liability embedded in the SHGs enables the members to overcome the problem of collateral security, a major barrier to obtaining credit from formal institutions. It also leads to peer monitoring which improves the rate of loan recoveries (Stiglitz, 1993). Some of the basic characteristics of SHGs such as small membership size and homogeneity of composition result in cohesiveness and effective participation of members in the functioning of the group (Fernandez, 1994).

According to A. Rahman, (1999), there are three objectives of microcredit: first, increasing women's access to credit is expected to increase their earning capabilities resulting in improvement in their socio-economic conditions and greater respect for them in the household; second, women form the majority of the world's poorest. In its Human Development Report, the UNDP (1997) stated that almost 70% of the 1.3 billion people living on less than USD1 a day are women and Women face a higher rate of unemployment and are relatively more disadvantaged than men. Generally, women are paid smaller wages and are involved in informal work compared with men. In order to improve their economic and social conditions, women need effective access to financial services. Third, organising women into groups tends to improve their group solidarity thus, strengthening their socio-economic empowerment. By focusing on women and supporting them, microcredit becomes an effective empowering tool. In general, SHGs have been able to reach out to the poor, especially women, effectively and help them obtain easy access to facilities such as savings and credit.

Although policymakers and non-government organisations view SHGs as an instrument of change which increases socio-economic empowerment of women, evidence on the ground and empirical data on the success of SHGs are mixed. The findings by Pitt and Khandher (1998), Khandher (2005), Schuler, Hashemi, Riley and Akhter (1996), Hashemi (1997); Mosley (2001); B. E. Coleman (2006); Datta (2004) and T. Islam (2007) show that microcredits are successful in elevating the socio-economic status of women. Works by Puhazhendi and Satyasai, (2001), Swain and Varghese (2009); Nagayya (2000); Rajeshwari (2002); and Vijayanthi, (2002) illustrated that despite the lack of resources, programmes implemented by SHGs have been quite efficient in improving socio-economic standing and empowerment of their beneficiaries. On the other hand, Abhjit Banerjee (2009), Hashemi (1996), Deininger (2009), R. Rahman (1999) say that the success of the programme has been highly inflated.

Other studies (Bhat, 2002; Linda Mayoux, 2000; L Mayoux, 2002; Rao, 2002) highlight savings and credit for economic activities that improve the income and asset accumulations of women. Studies by Garikipati, (2008); Kabeer, (2001); Mayoux, (2000, 2001) show that an empowered woman who invests money in self owned enterprise, uses the income to improve the nutritional status of her family, educates her children and begins to actively participate in her family decision-makings (Ackerly, 1995; Hashemi, 1996; Hulme, 1996; Rahman 1999). This has led to greater respect for women within the households (Kabeer, 2001; Kumar, 2009) ; increase in their mobility, ability to articulate, self-confidence and esteem (Hashemi, 1996; Husain, Mukerjee and Dutta, 2012; Krishnaraj and Kay, 2002; Putnam, 2000) and; growth of collective identity and political awareness (Hashemi S.M., 1996). The incidence of violence against women has decreased to a great extent (Hashemi S.M., 1996; Husain *et al.*, 2012).

The SHGs, via microcredit, has played an important role in lessening the susceptibility of the poor towards poverty via the creation of assets, increasing income, and consumption by providing emergency assistance and empowerment and restoring confidence in women to take control of their assets (Umashankar, 2006). The IFAD report on mainstreaming gender found increased levels of self-confidence and self-esteem among women along with a capacity to articulate their needs and a rise in respect in their households. The studies by Paromita (2007), Razvi (2006), Jakimow and Kilby (2006), Reddy and Manak (2005), Vijayanthi (2002) showed positive impact on empowerment of women. It can be concluded that the common indicator used in microcredit for women's empowerment are control over loans, decision-making abilities and mobility outside the household. It is widely perceived that if women can achieve autonomy in these facets of their lives through access to microcredit, then the structures of inequality contributing to women's subordination can

be broken down. Undoubtedly, such indicators are useful in understanding the impact of microcredit in the process of empowerment. Empowerment can be seen in the context of individual development, group development, or the local community or issues related to the gender and politics. It is worth mentioning that the outcome differs from society to society.

3. Methodology

This section outlines the sources of data, sampling, collection techniques and other methods employed in data analysis. Data was derived from both primary and secondary sources. A structured interview schedule helped in collecting primary data from sample SGH members. Quantitative methodology is adopted using self-reporting method. It involves data collection in the numerical form in order to explain or to predict the phenomenon of interest. As the survey is undertaken after the programme introduction, the pre-programme information is based on recall. A comparison was made between the level of empowerment before joining the SHG and their conditions after three years of joining the group in order to see the extent of improvement after programme intervention. The main criterion for selecting the SHGs was the SHGs must consist of members who had completed three years² of programme intervention. Accordingly, those who became SHG members since January 2007 were not included in the assessment. Any member who had been a member for not more than three years was excluded from the study. Researchers (Amin, Hill and Li, 1995; Joseph, 2005; Puhazhendhi, 2000; Schuler and Hashemi, 1994) investigated if there has been a significant difference in urban women's mobility and social interactions, labour patterns, access to and control over resources, control over decision making and attitudinal and behavioural change before and after the interventions of SHGs in Chennai.

The subjects of the present study were women SHG members in Chennai. The required samples were chosen by adopting a three-stage stratified random sampling method. The first stage involved the NGOs, the second stage focused on the SHG and the third stage dealt with SHG members on the basis of demographic regions. According to the Corporation of Chennai, the demographic region in Chennai is divided into three broad categories North Chennai, Central Chennai and South Chennai consisting of 10 zones. In August 2010, the city of Chennai had 29 registered NGOs under Mahallir Thittam with 25,359 SHGs whereby 14 NGOs are located in North Chennai, eight in Central Chennai and seven in South Chennai. The concentration of NGOs (14) in North Chennai indicates most of the residents live below poverty line compared with other areas. The sample size included two NGOs from North Chennai one each from Central Chennai and South Chennai respectively Four NGOs were selected in the ratio of 2:1:1³. The NGOs were selected randomly. They are Marialyam and Sorannampal Education Trust from North Chennai, Reedha from Central Chennai and Niveditha from South Chennai.

Out of the total number of SHGs which had completed three years, 10% were selected for the sample and 10 individual members were selected from each group for semi-structured interviews (the average size of the SHGs are 10-15 members and to make it more consistent, 10 members were selected from each group under the sampling framework). Individuals selected come from different age groups, occupation, economic and marital status. The following table shows the sampling strategy of the SHGs.

Table 1: Sampling framework of SHGs.

Names of the NGO	Total no. of groups	Total no. of groups completed 3 years	Sample Size of the SHGs (10% of total groups which have completed 3 years)	Total members (10 members from each SHG)
Marialyam	921	212	21 groups	210
Sorannampal Education Trust (SET)	1898	272	27 groups	270
Reedha	454	185	18 groups	180
Niveditha	321	110	11 groups	110
Total			77 groups	770

According to Krejcie and Mogran (1970), the representative sample size for 25,359 SHG members is 383 respondents. In order to make it more representative 770 members were chosen as seen in the table. Out of the total sample size of 770 SHG members, only 758 responded for the quantitative survey. The remaining 12 respondents were not from a particular group of community, age, religion, area or education. Thus the study concluded they did not represent a selective sample loss.

4. Indicators of Women's Empowerment

Women's empowerment is not a one-way traffic. It is also a never-ending process. The entire process of women's empowerment has to be evaluated continuously through the feedback mechanism to maintain a dynamic home statistics. According to Narayana (1998), "Empowerment of women is a process whereby the powerless or disempowered gain a greater share of control of resources and decision-making". The process of gaining control over self, ideology and resources, which determines power, may also be termed as empowerment.

The indicators of empowerment are the ability to make decisions, participation in household and financial activities, the right of access to property, the dexterity to take shelter in laws and have one's own power to

decide regarding one's birth rights and the ability to expand one's own area. Two of the indexes are usually applied for assessment.

Women's empowerment constitute increase in self-esteem and individual and collective confidence; increase in articulation, knowledge and awareness levels on issues affecting the community at large, and women in particular, such as women's health, nutrition, reproductive rights, legal rights, literacy; participation in other events related to their lives; increase in the bargaining power of women, as individuals in the home and the community as well as in the collectives of women; decision making power over the kind of work she is doing; control over her own income and expenditure and whether she is still subservient to male members in the family (Raheim and Bolden, 1995).

The quantitative indicators are: demographic trends such as mortality rates, fertility rates, sex ratio, life expectancy at birth and average age of marriage; number of women participating in different development programmes and the participation of women in political processes at the local levels (Mehra, 1997). Domestic abuse may be a common "tool" employed by husbands to reinforce their authority within the domain of the household (Heise, Ellsberg and Gottemoeller, 1999). The reluctance of women to oppose such violence and tolerate it in silence have been well documented (Manderson and Bennett, 2003). Participation in SHGs reduces her tolerance of domestic violence not only by empowering her economically but also by increasing her awareness (Husain *et al.*, 2012).

The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) which supported the Tamil Nadu Women's Development Project in late 1999 had suggested certain measures for the empowerment of women. The project aimed to bring about the social and economic betterment of women. The empowerment indices used with reference to developed countries may not fit into the context of developing countries like India. The IFAD empowerment indices have been already tested in many studies in India particularly to study the Mahallir Thittam. These are quantified into indicators that can be used for statistical testing.

As mentioned earlier, the empowerment indicators used in developed countries may not be suitable in the context of developing countries like India where people are trapped in social and cultural bondages. The IFAD model has already been tested in the context of India, especially in the SHGs under the Mahallir Thittam programme. The present study thus adopted the IFAD model of empowerment and its indices to study the empowerment of SHG members after joining the programme.

The IFAD Model

The IFAD defined empowerment as having the following four main characteristics:

i) Changes in Women's Mobility and Social Interaction – The study observed that this kind of change was most likely to occur among group members whereby the women attained greater self-confidence, had greater respect in the family, played a more assertive role in the domestic sphere, when there was a reduction in domestic violence, when women had greater participation in community affairs and local elections and had more freedom to visit their parents, relatives and friends. These nine indices were used to study changes in women's mobility and social interactions.

ii) Changes in Women's Labour Patterns - This study observed four empowerment indicators and found members had better selling and buying skills, independent marketing and better business practices.

iii) Changes in Access to and Control over Resources – The study observed five empowerment indicators namely, when the women played a more assertive role in financial matters, when they gained new skills through training and practices, had a viable and disciplined family budget, had the right to purchase their own real estate and gain skills for better pricing of their products.

iv) Changes in Intra-Household Decision Making – The study observed the empowerment indicators as the following: when the women played a more assertive role in their children's education and health, decisions on recreation, had increased awareness to improve the living standards of the family and community. These indicators were used to measure women's role in intra household decision making.

5. Findings

The study identified various indicators that had contributed towards empowerment of the respondents and examined SHGs operations in this regard. It used Descriptive Statistics to summarise the views and self-reporting responses from members of SHGs in terms of frequency of distribution, mean standard deviation and percentage. T-test, Chi-square, Anova followed by the Duncan Multiple Range Test (DMRT), were used to compare conditions of women before and after joining the SHGs.

The quantitative results are presented in three parts i) profile of the sample SHGs - this provides information related to size of the groups, the training undergone and meetings held ii) social background of women in SHGs - this includes demographic details of the women in SHGs and iii) Impact on Empowerment of Women in SHG: The variables used in the IFAD model such as changes in women's mobility and social interaction, labour patterns, control over resources and decision making skills are also discussed.

5.1 Profile of the Sample SHGs.

Table 2 shows the frequency of distribution of SHG member. In terms of group size, 42.74% of the women were in groups of 16-20 members, 31.8% in groups of above 20 while 25.5% were in groups of 10-15 members. The average group number was 15. In order to study the performance of the SHGs, it is important to look at the homogeneity of the group. Homogeneity here means each group member living in the same area or location. For duration of membership, 51.2% had been members for three years, 31.3% for four years and 17.5% had been members for five years. The study found the size of groups to be relatively larger in the older groups which have member members for more than four years compared with n younger groups which had less than three years of membership.

Kabeer (1999) posits that training has improved their entrepreneurial potential leading to more sustainable women's empowerment. Thus, proper training by NGOs or government officials is needed to assess how far these loans have been utilised. When such interventions are periodically monitored, women will become better entrepreneurs and will invest their loans in income generating activities to boost their empowerment levels.

Table 2:Frequency distribution of SHG information and training attended by the SHG members

SHG Information	Frequency	Percentage
Group Size		
10 - 15 members	193	25.5
16 - 20 members	324	42.7
Above 20 members	241	31.8
Membership Duration		
3 years	388	51.2
4 years	237	31.3
5 years	133	17.5
Training received		
Yes	628	82.8
No	130	17.2
Type of Training		
EDP	189	30.1
Handicraft	297	47.3
Animators and Representatives	142	22.6

Table 2: (continued)

SHG Information	Frequency	Percentage
Duration of the Training		
Below 2 days	256	40.8
2 - 5 days	229	36.5
6 - 10 days	120	19.1
Above 10 days	23	3.6
Benefits of the Training		
Very useful	156	20.6
Useful	462	60.9
Somewhat useful	72	9.5
Not useful	68	9.0
Total	758	100.0

There are three different types of training provided to SHG members: Entrepreneur Development Programme (EDP), Handicraft Training and Animators and Representatives (A&R) training. Members who want to start a micro business need EDP training to develop basic skills of business and to increase knowledge in generating income. Those interested in handicraft are provided training to gain expertise in jute bag making, embroidery and doll making among others. Training is provided to group leaders and their representatives to help them learn new skills such as group formation, book keeping, savings, loans and insurance. Almost 82.8% participated in the training while the rest had not attended any training programmes due to personal problems and lack of interest. On the usefulness and utility of training, 60.9% reported the training was useful while 20.6% reported that the training was very useful. Some respondents replied that they were no longer interested in training on soap making, phenol making and homemade products. Instead, they wanted to learn methods to make new products so that they could sustain themselves in the market.

5.2 Social Background of Women in SHGs

In this section, the social back grounds of the women in SHGs are presented. Table 3 provides information on the frequency of distribution based on demographics.

Table 3 shows that 38% of the participants were between 31 to 40 years while 25.7% were below 30 years, 22.3% between 41 to 50 years and 14% above 50 years. The average age of the respondents in the SHGs was 38. The studies conducted by Joseph (2005), Lalitha (1996), Srinivasan (1993),

Ramamurthy (1990) showed that the best age to join SHGs, becoming an innovative group and performing effectively in microcredit is between the ages of 20 and 40. Age is a determining factor to measure human development, mental maturity and capacity to make decisions in life. Table 3 shows that Backward communities¹ accounted for 44.8% of the samples while the Most Backward communities accounted for 21.6%. The Scheduled Caste⁵ made up 22.6% of the sample while the Scheduled Tribe⁶ formed 6.9% which was a breakthrough in Indian society. Only 4.1% of the participants were from the Forward community⁷ as they were the dominant group in the Indian social structure. These findings attested to the positive approach and outcome of the programme. The members from the Forward Community who were economically well off also showed interest in joining the SHGs which indicated that they were influenced by the programme.

Table 3: Frequency distribution of demographic values of SHG members

Demographic Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Age in years		
Below 30	195	25.7
31 - 40	288	38.0
41 - 50	169	22.3
Above 50	106	14
Community		
Forward Communities	31	4.1
Backward Communities	340	44.8
Most Backward Communities	164	21.6
Scheduled Caste	171	22.6
Scheduled Tribes	52	6.9
Religion		
Hindu	604	79.7
Christian	81	10.7
Muslim	73	9.6
Marital Status		
Single	69	9.1
Married	614	81.0
Separated	40	5.3
Widowed	35	4.6
Educational Qualifications		
Illiterate	65	8.6

Table 3: (continued)

Demographic Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Primary	123	16.2
Elementary School	183	24.1
High School	262	34.6
Higher Secondary School	69	9.1
Graduates	56	7.4
Occupation		
Home Maker	242	31.9
Self Employed	322	42.5
Tailor	49	6.5
Vendor/Petty Traders	49	6.5
Government Employee	20	2.6
Private Employee	21	2.8
Others	55	7.2
Total	758	100.0

The majority or 79.7% of the participants were Hindus. Hinduism is the main religion in India especially in the study area. Christians who made up for 10.7% of the sample and Muslims 9.6% were also represented in the analysis. This showed that the functions of SHG were widespread and benefitted women from all religions. With regard to marital status, a significant percentage of 81% of the participants were married, 9.1% were single, 5.3% were separated while the rest were widowed. Generally, the married women from the lower strata face many problems. Supplementary income is needed to support their family and children. The rising cost of living at that time meant the women had to earn more. They needed to engage in economic activities to increase their income level. Married women had to shoulder multiple responsibilities such as housekeeping and looking after children and managing the family including the extended ones. These microcredit income-generating activities via the SGHs were deemed as best suited to satisfy their economic needs.

Table 3 shows that more than one third of the respondents, 34.6%, received high school education while 24.1% received elementary education and 16.2% had completed primary education. About 9.1% of the participants received higher than secondary schooling and a small percentage, 7.4%, were graduates. The illiterate women accounted for 8.6% of total respondents. The majority of the participants were literate having received high school education. This could be due to the education facilities available nearby. Educated members were considered assets to the groups as they managed all the records and

documents in addition to supporting the groups in bank-related activities. The positive attitude of the educated women encourages the other members to be self-motivated to acquire knowledge and use the microcredit loan facilities to start businesses. The findings showed that education, whether formal or informal, helped the members to get involved in economic activities. Groups which comprised educated members performed better comparatively in their income-generating activities.

5.3 Impact on Empowerment of Women in SHG

Empowerment of women is important for national development. The issue of women's empowerment is multifaceted and relates to economic opportunities, property rights, political representations, social equality and personal rights. The widespread use of the term "women's empowerment" by various departments has resulted in multiple meanings and interpretations and its association with a diversity of strategies. Kabeer.N (2001) noted that when women lack money, their level of self-confidence and esteem had negative consequence on their personal growth. The current study found that injection of credit will improve their social status leading to improvement in their economic status and making the women more empowered.

Women's empowerment is a process by which women gain inner power to express and defend their rights, develop greater confidence, self-esteem and control over their own lives and personal and social relationships. Studies conducted by Sheetal Sharma (2006), Yadav (2008), Rottler (1996) and Valsamma Antony (2006) showed that empowerment of women would mean equipping women to be economically independent and self-reliant with a positive self-esteem to enable them to face any difficult situation. The impact of the SHGs was more evident in the creation of new assets in the non-farming sector such as productive assets and consumer durables. This section investigates the level of empowerment of women in the SHGs.

The IFAD outlined certain measures that are crucial in the process of empowering women which this study had adopted. The four main processes that could lead to women's empowerment are: Changes in women's mobility and social interaction, changes in women's labour patterns, changes in intra-household decision making, and changes in access to and control over resources. The table below shows the frequency of distribution of the four empowerment indicators using IFAD definition.

The study found that the women had become more mobile and began interactions with different officials. They learned new skills through training and most of the members learned how to access the banks. They were also encouraged to participate in special events such as Women's Day, Independence and Republic Day Celebrations and other festivals.

Table 4: Frequency distribution values of empowerment indicators using IFAD model

Empowerment Indices	Increased	No change	Decreased
Changes in Women's Mobility and Social Interaction Values of SHG members			
Greater Self Confidence	83.0	13.7	3.3
More Assertive Role in Domestic Sphere	85.0	10.6	4.4
Greater Respect in the Family	70.6	28.0	1.4
Reduction in Domestic Violence	5.7	65.7	28.6
More Participation in Local Elections	76.1	22.4	1.5
Greater Participation in Community Affairs	67.5	28.2	4.3
Visiting Parents	69.3	27.7	3.0
Visiting Relatives	65.7	16.9	17.4
Visiting Friends	65.7	24.0	10.3
Changes in Labour Patterns of SHG members			
Better Buying Skills	57.0	39.7	3.3
Better Selling Skills	66.1	32.2	1.7
Independent Marketing	69.3	29.6	0.1
Better Business Practices	73.7	24.8	1.5
Changes in Access and Control of Resources of SHG members			
More Assertive Role in Financial Matters	76.3	22.0	1.7
Gained New Skills	77.6	20.2	2.2
Better Family Budgeting	70.1	26.3	3.6
Purchase of Real Estate's	26.0	70.2	3.8
Better Pricing of Products	72.3	25.7	2.0
Changes in Intra Household Decision Making of SHG members			
More Assertive to Children's Education and Health	82.3	16.0	1.7
More assertive in deciding on Recreation	52.7	45.1	2.2
Increased Awareness to improve Family Lives	72.3	26.2	1.5
Increased Awareness to improve Community Affairs	83.4	14.8	1.8

The participants were asked whether members gained greater confidence after participating in the SHGs. Nearly 83.0% of the participants reported increased self-confidence, 13.7% reported no change while the rest reported their self confidence decreased. Most of the comments on empowerment via SHGs were positive.

When the participants were asked if they played a more assertive role in the domestic sphere after joining the SHGs, nearly 85.0% responded positively, 10.6% reported no change while the rest noted a decrease in assertiveness. The general positive note could be due to the fact when SHG members gained more social acceptance, they are more assertive in solving many issues in their areas before the involvement of local political personalities and social activists.

Nearly 70.6% of the respondents reported an increase in respect in the family, 28.0% reported no change while 1.4% reported a decrease. It is well known that Indian society is patriarchal i.e. male-dominated and the respondents reported becoming independent after joining the SHGs. A few families hesitated in accepting such social changes in their women. On domestic violence, only 5.7% of the participants replied that it (domestic violence) had increased, 65.7% reported no change while the rest reported it had decreased. Domestic violence refers to physical or oral abuse by family members and relatives. Most of the respondents reported that quarrels in the family had reduced. Programme intervention had also resulted in members being aware of their day-to-day fiscal discipline and how to meet their expenses wisely. Some respondents commented that they had begun questioning their husbands' earnings and expenditure. In cases where the husband was addicted to alcohol or cigarettes, the questions were not welcomed and leading to violence. In general however, the women had adopted a bold attitude in meeting their challenges in life indicating positive impact of this programme.

On the question as to whether they participated in local elections, nearly 76.1% reported an increase, 22.4% reported no change while the rest reported a decrease. Nearly 67.5% of the respondents replied they had participated more actively in community affairs. The members were more mobile to visit their parents, friends and relatives. Nearly 69.3% of the members reported they had more freedom to visit their parents, 27.7% reported no change while the rest reported a decrease. On the question as to whether the members were more mobile to visit their relatives, nearly 65.7% of the subjects responded positively, 16.9% reported no change while the rest reported a decrease. As to visiting friends, nearly 65.7% reported an increase, 24.0% reported no change, while the rest reported a decrease. After joining the SHGs, the respondents noted an increase in a positive attitude towards life. When they joined and worked with other members, the respondents felt that they were very united. Problems were among the group members and sensible solutions were found. The unity among the group members discouraged any ill feelings among

them. If any of their group member or women within the area experienced any kind of abuse or injustice, the other members supported and fought for their rights and justice.

The table 4, shows the indices on the Changes in Women's Labour Patterns. The respondents were asked whether they had acquired Better Buying Skills after joining the SHGs. Nearly 57% of them reported that they had seen an improvement in this skill after joining the SHG and nearly 66.1% responded they had seen an increase in better selling skills. On the question as to whether they were good in Independent Marketing, nearly 69.3% reported it had increased while 29.6% reported no change and the rest replied it had decreased. The marketing of their products was difficult not because the women were not capable but due to the fact that they were involved in similar types of business where the market competition was very stiff.

The members were asked whether they had learned Better Business Practices after joining the SHG. About 73.7% reported they had learned better business practices after programme intervention, 24.8% reported no change while the rest reported a decrease indicating they did not gain any new business skills. Most of the women were very happy that group cooperation and peer group motivation had pushed them to be more active in business.

For the third empowerment indicator on Changes in Access to and Control over Resources, the members were asked if they played a More Assertive Role in Financial Matters. Nearly 76.3% of the respondents reported an increase and around 77.6% reported an increase gaining new skills. To the question as to whether they have shown improvement in the area Family Budgeting after joining the SHGs, nearly 70.1% responded positively. After the programme intervention, members became more aware of their daily budget and in meeting their expenses. On the Purchase of Real Estates, nearly 26% reported an increase, 70.2% reported no change while the rest reported a decrease. The study found that even if there was an increase in the purchase of real estate, it was done only by the men (heads) in their family under their names. Though the women members gave active support and advice regarding this the final decision was made by the men. More than half of the respondents reported they did not purchase any property as their income level was not sufficient to invest in real estate. Table 4 shows the four empowerment indices based on the IFAD definition. On the question as to whether the members are More Assertive about Children's Health and Education, nearly 82.3% of the respondents reported that they were more assertive. Providing good education appeared to be an important motive for assertiveness among the women in the SHGs. Nearly 52.7% of the members responded that they played an Assertive role in Deciding on Recreation. On the Increased Awareness to improve their Family Lives, 72.3% of the members reported there was an increase in awareness. On the question regarding Increased Awareness to improve their Community life, nearly 83.4% of the participants reported an increase.

Table 4 displays the four broad empowerment indicators. Most of the areas had positive answers from the respondents which indicated that the members were progressing towards better empowerment after joining the SHG microcredit initiative. In order to rank the four empowerment indicators, the Friedman test was conducted and the table below provides the details.

Table 5: Friedman test to study the empowerment of women after joining the SHG

Empowerment Indices	Mean Rank	Chi square value	P value
Changes in Women Mobility and Social Interaction	2.74		
Changes in Women's Labour Patterns	2.48		
Changes in Women's Access to and Control over Resources	2.18	111.2	0.000**
Changes in Women's Control over Intra Household Decision making	2.60		

From Table 5, it can be deduced that changes in women's mobility and social interaction scored the highest mean value, followed by changes in women's control over intra household decision making and changes in women's labour patterns and changes in women's access and control over resources. Since the P value was less than 0.01, the study concluded that there was a significant improvement in the empowerment of women after joining the SHGs at the 1% level. The mean rank for women's mobility was the highest followed in decreasing order by women's control over household decision making, women's labour patterns and women's access and control over resources.

Decision making is considered as one of the important indicators for empowerment. The empowered women should be able to participate in the process of decision making. Thus, the process of empowering a woman is not merely about improving their physical and social conditions but also to ensure equal participation in the decision-making process. Using data collected in the study, a chi-square test was performed to study the significance. The table below displays the chi-square test results.

About two thirds of the participants noted positive changes in their decision making abilities at home and in the SHGs. The Chi-square value was 529.208 and since the P value was less than 0.01, the study concluded that there was a significant change at the 1 % level in the empowerment of women upon joining the SHGs.

The results showed that women had become more empowered and enjoyed greater decision making powers after joining SHGs. This showed that there was an improvement in the status of the members.

Table 6: Chi Square test to study the importance of decision-making of members before and after joining the SHGs

Importance of Decision Making at Home	Importance of Decision Making at SHG			Chi-Square	P Value
	Neglected	Consulted	Total		
Neglected	216	45	261	529.2	0.000**
	(82.8)	(17.2)			
Consulted	[95.2]	[8.5]	497		
	11	486			
	(2.2)	(97.8)			
	[4.8]	91.5			
Total	227	531	758		

Note: ⁱ. The value within () refers to Row Percentage,
ⁱⁱ. The value within [] refers to Column Percentage
 ** denotes significance at 1 % level

6. Conclusions and Implications

The findings from this study showed that SHGs played a major role in the development of women. The women belonging to the lowest strata were given a chance to interact with many institutions such as banks, NGOs and officials from the government in addition to being exposed to public institutions. Group participation was one of the major elements of SHGs. Meetings helped to develop friendship, express solidarity with the problems of others, develop natural leadership and enhance the members' capacity for development. Peer groups provided an efficient social support system. The women discovered a new identity through SHGs as reported by some of the members.

In well-established SHGs, members contributed substantially to their family development in the form of getting credit for the education of children, health needs and even for weddings and the construction of houses. It paved the way for poor women to be involved in income-generating activities and helped them to increase their savings and mobilisation of capital in the future.

Women's empowerment is synonymous with the achievement of equality and equal mindedness in society and will result in traditional female values being more respected in society. The empowerment of women, through the collective action for development of the SHGs, would lead to benefits not only for the individuals and women's groups but also for the family and community as a whole. They assume the role of decision-makers in the major aspects of the family and community life. The possible outcomes of women's empowerment through a group approach at the household level are self-

employment with assured wages throughout the year, sustainable livelihoods, improved health and education, enhanced social dignity and better status for women and the female children. The contributions of the study is summarised as follows:

- i. Majority of studies focused on rural areas. The SHG programme among the urban poor is minimally researched. This study is focused on the urban women SHGs engaged in the microcredit programme in the city of Chennai.
- ii. The research findings are greatly inspired by the Theory of Relative Deprivation. Some of the poor women in the study area were relatively more deprived in a number of ways; they suffered from human deprivation in terms of basic needs of life such as access to education, adequate shelter and productive assets. In terms of living conditions, findings of the study showed that the women in SHGs in North Chennai were highly deprived compared with the other areas. In some areas like Elephant Gate, the women were living without basic needs such as sanitation, electricity, water and road facilities. Even among the slum dwellers, the living conditions were considered very backward.
- iii. The status of women in the SHGs could be explained by employing the Microcredit Feminisation Paradigm. This study illustrates that there were attitude and behavioural changes among the women as a result of the introduction of the SHG programme. Such types of interventions led to a noticeable change in the attitudinal and psychological aspects of the women. The social transformation helped to increase their income earning capacity. More than two thirds of the women had enhanced social and economic independence resulting in an improvement in their social and economic status in life.
- iv. The Empowerment Theory can be used to explain the status of women in the study area. The findings from this study showed that more than two thirds of the respondents had attained decision-making skills and better status in the family and society. More than half of the respondents showed better mobility and greater awareness of their health as well as the importance of education for women. They also learnt many skills. In short, the empowerment of women enhanced their social and economic independency.

Even though the women generated their own income, improved their economic standards and were involved in social activities in many places, in practice, they still lagged behind and subservient to the men. When it came to asset

creation or inheriting family property, they were treated unfairly compared with the male family members. This social development approach will improve the socio-economic status of the participants and dismantle gender division of labour; provide women access to markets, skills training and technological support. The credit and social development approach will help to promote significant changes in the lives of women and improve their status.

Notes

1. <http://www.tamilnaduwomen.org>
2. This study focused on the groups that completed three years of membership. The SHGs need to accumulate their savings and complete their credit rating by NGOs, only then are they eligible for external linkage funds. After that, the SHGs can be involved in economic activities. It takes a minimum of one year to stabilise the SHGs. Upon completing five years, the SHGs can work independently without the support of the NGOs. The SHGs have been given a option to dissolve the group and disperse the funds collected or if they wish, they can function with the NGOs. The SHGs of this study have been operating between three and five years.
3. A sampling is proportionate and 10% is selected from the NGOs located in North Chennai, South Chennai and Central Chennai (i.e., 10% of 14 NGOs located in North Chennai is two NGOs, 10% of seven NGOs located in South Chennai is 1 NGO and 10% of eight NGOs located in Central Chennai is 1 NGO), in the is 2:1:1 ratio.
4. Backward Communities and Most Backward Communities are untouchables having better social conditions compared with the SC/ST. In some cases, they convert from Hinduism to Islam or Christianity.
5. Scheduled Caste includes the untouchables. Also called Dalits, they are socially and economically most deprived in society.
6. Scheduled Tribes are nomads who live in forest areas and mountains. In the course of development, they started migrating and living in rural and urban areas.
7. Forward Communities denote the group of people who do not qualify for any social discrimination schemes under the reserve benefit of the government as they are socially and economically affluent, enjoying a better social stratification.

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