

14. EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

One of the thrust areas of development strategy is the focus on Empowerment of Women. It is in this light that there has been a conscious effort on the part of the Government to implement programmes, formulate policies to improve the status of women in terms of health, nutrition and education. In order to actively associate women in development process, participation in PRI institutions is being encouraged. Interest in the welfare of women is not confined to Government alone, Voluntary Agencies, NGOs and other institutions are also actively involved in the process of empowering women. Increasing participation of women in economic activities offers challenges and opportunities to Governments both at Centre and State.

Tamil Nadu's population has grown at a slower pace than the rest of the Southern Region, and the nation, over the years; the pace has slackened significantly in the most recent decade. The lagged growth of female population relative to males is not peculiar to the State; the national and the regional trends are not dissimilar. In the Southern Region, only Kerala is an exception with its female population consistently outstripping males. Tamil Nadu has 30.84 million females in its population of 62.11 million (2001). Every third woman of the Southern Region, comprising the States of Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, lives here.

1. High Density:

Despite a decline in the rate of growth of female population Tamil Nadu has more women per sq.km., at 478, almost twice the national average as also that of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. In the Southern Region, only Kerala has a higher density of female population, at 749 per sq.km. Intra-State variations exist in female density with Dharmapuri having the least number of women, at 174 per sq.km., and Kanyakumari the highest, at 726.

2. Sex Ratio:

The sex ratio-number of females per 1000 males - has registered a continuous decline in the State over the years with an exception in 2001. According to 2001 Population Census, the sex ration stood at 986 compared to 974 in 1991. Still at 986 in 2001, it is higher than national average, of 933. Rural - Urban differentials exist in the sex ratio in the State, with the former having more females per 1000 males. The rural sex ratio has consistently deteriorated while the urban ratio has improved marginally during the years 1971-2001, partly the result of an improvement in education and health services in the urban areas. In 2001, only 7 districts - Vellore, Thanjavur, Sivagangai, Tiruchirapalli, Nilgiris, Tuticorin and Tirunelveli - have favourable sex ratios. The Schedules Caste population in Tamil Nadu has a higher sex ratio compared to the rest of the population.

3. Life Expectancy at Birth:

The life expectancy has improved over time in the State for both males and females, the female life expectancy, at 65, in the State is still modest compared to the level, of 78, in the advanced countries. While women live on an average six years longer than men in the advanced nations, life expectancy for females is lower by two years in

Tamil Nadu than the males, suggesting a lag in the decline of female mortality relative to males.

4. Literacy Level:

The female literacy level is on the rise in the State over the decades, though it is still low at 64.55 (2001) compared to the male literacy level of 82.33. Tamil Nadu also fares relatively better than the nation in female literacy; every third women in the State is literate against the nation's one in four.

Regional imbalances exist in the State with the rural literacy levels lagging behind urban, reflecting the concentration of educational efforts in the latter.

Rural Tamil Nadu, which supports nearly two-thirds of the State's families, has only one in four of these in the literate category; against this half the urban families are literate.

Table - 1: Literacy Rate : Tamil Nadu

Census	Literacy Rate (%)								
	Rural			Urban			Total		
	Male	Female	All	Male	Female	All	Male	Female	All
1981	51	26	39	73	54	64	58	35	47
1991	67	42	55	86	70	78	74	51	63
2001	77	56	67	88	76	82	82	65	73

Source: Director of Census Operation, Chennai.

One of the challenges being addressed is to improve the literacy rate for SC/ST women, which is still relatively lower when compared to the overall category of female. This is sought to be taken care of while implementing the programmes.

5. Strategy for Women Empowerment:

The Government has been adopting a three-pronged development approach to empower women:

- **Social empowerment** through renewing all the persisting inequalities, disparities and other problems besides providing easy access to basic minimum services;
- **Economic empowerment** through promotion of employment cum income generation activities and
- **Social justice** through eliminating all kinds of discrimination with a strength of legislative support, affirmative action, awareness creation and required change in the mind sets of the people.

6. Education:

In order to address the gender bias and increase the reach of education for women, the Government has set up high schools and colleges exclusively meant for women . In order to give impetus to education of SC/ST girls, a package of concessions such as free supply of text books and uniforms, free boarding, lodging and clothing to hostellers,

special coaching and remedial classes for dull students and provision of mid-day meal scheme are being offered. The table below presents the status of enrolment of children at the various stages of education from primary to various courses.

Table - 2 : Enrolment by Sex

(in Lakhs)

Stages of Education	2002-03		
	Boys	Girls	Total
Primary Schools	32.16	29.84	63.00
High Schools	9.39	9.57	18.96
Higher Secondary Schools	23.19	20.48	43.67
UG Courses	1.67	1.79	3.46
PG Courses	0.25	0.27	0.52
Research Studies	0.015	0.019	0.034
Certificate Courses	0.005	0.002	0.007
Other Courses	0.02	0.03	0.05

Source: Policy Note on Education, Government of Tamil Nadu.

Besides enrolment, attention is paid to the provision of adequate number of women teachers.

Table -3: Number of Women Teachers

Stages of Education	2002-03		
	Men	Women	Total
Primary Schools	64458	115746	180204
High Schools	29963	27658	57621
Higher Secondary Schools	62651	60194	122845
Colleges	12500	9604	22104

Source: Policy Note on Education, Government of Tamil Nadu.

7. High drop-out:

While the continuing rise in school enrolment is an encouraging sign, a disturbing feature is the high drop-out rate, particularly for girls. One in three girls drops out of the school at the primary and middle levels. The drop out rate is lower at the secondary levels but so is the level of enrolment here. Poverty has very strong links with education of girl children. The higher drop out rate for girls is because they are increasingly drawn out of the school system to undertake domestic work and also due to the prevalent, belief in the rural areas that it will be difficult to find suitable bridegrooms for educated girls. A number of other factors that have been identified are distance from school, onset of puberty (and the concomitant social treatment), availability of women teachers, availability of separate schools for girls, availability of public transport, toilet facilities in schools with running water, etc.

8. Capacity-Building and Skill Formation:

This strategy helps to be self supporting and enable the vulnerable women to compete with others in the arena of job market. This strategy provides adequate scope for strengthening economic capital, intellectual capital and social capital for women. Towards achieving the above objectives, the Department of Rural Development has been

implementing the Self-Employment Scheme known as Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana. This scheme is a synthesis of all erstwhile schemes viz. IRDP, Million Well Scheme, TRYSEM, GKY, DWCRA and SITRA. Formation of Self Help Groups is the essence of the scheme SGSY. The concept of Self Help Groups is the brain child of the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development. This institution provides refinancing facility to enable the Self Help Groups to take up economic activities.

This scheme focuses on enrolling the unemployed and poverty- stricken women folk under one umbrella namely Self Help Groups. These Self Help Groups are aiming at social mobilisation, training and capacity- building. Following these steps, income generating assets are expected to be created by the members of the SHGs. For financing the micro enterprises, the Government extends subsidy whereas bank lends credit. This micro credit system is a viable alternative credit channel to the poor because they have no easy access to conventional credit channels because of their inability to produce collateral securities and involvement of high transaction cost. Micro finance is routed through the medium of SHGs. Highlights of the achievements of SHGs are set out below.

Progress of Mahalir Thittam as on June 2003

➤ Number of SHGs formed	: 134175
➤ Number of families	: 51955
➤ No. of Women enrolled	: 2284512
➤ No. of SC/ST beneficiaries	: 974613
➤ Total Savings (in lakhs)	: Rs.32042.95

Source: Project Officers Review Meeting, Tamil Nadu Corporation for Development of Women Ltd., Chennai - 600 032.

The Mahalir Mempattu Thittam is being implemented by the Tamil Nadu Corporation for Development of Women was set up in 1983. Main objectives of the scheme were to promote saving habits, nurture entrepreneurial skills and aptitudes, exposure to banking transactions, disentangling from the clutches of the local money lenders, etc. As on June 2003, it covered 1859 lakh women who got enrolled in 1.08 lakh SHGs in both rural and urban areas. The target groups are indigent women including widows and orphans. The objectives of the Mahalir Mempattu Thittam are furnished in the following box.

Box
MAHALIR THITTAM MISSION STATEMENT

- *To build capacity of poor and disadvantaged women in order that they are enabled to cross all social and economic barriers and thereby facilitate their full development into empowered citizens;*
- *To achieve the equality of status of poor women as participants, decision makers and beneficiaries in the democratic, economic, social and cultural spheres of life;*
- *To create or reorient democratic, economic and social processes and institutions to enable poor women to participate fully and actively in decision-making in the family and community, and at the local, district, state and national levels;*
- *To empower women to work together with men as equal partners and to inspire a new generation of women and men to work together for equality, sustainable development and communal harmony;*
- *To promote and ensure the human rights of women at all stages of their life cycle;*
- *To advocate changes in Government policies and programmes in favour of disadvantaged women.*

Over the years the Self Help Groups have attained a critical mass giving empowered women a larger role in the development of the community. The women formed themselves into groups in villages, saved money and funded their small ventures. In order to sustain their development the panchayat level Federation are helping the SHGs tap their potential. Appropriate interventions and support in terms of training, capacity-building, micro credit and micro financing windows and marketing support is being provided to the SHGs.

9. Employment:

In addition to the traditional sources of employment such as cultivation, dairying, cottage industries, women are increasingly seeking non-farm and even non-rural forms of employment both in the organised and unorganised sector. Hence employment policies require to be fine-tuned to realise this objective. The Work Participation Rate for females rose from 26.52 in 1981 to 31.32 in 2001. The respective figures for males are 56.58 and 58.96. One positive aspect is that, the trend of WPR for women seems to be improving favourably over the last three decades.

Table - 3 : Tamil Nadu : Work Participation Rates and Number of Workers

Rural / Urban	WPR (%)			Workers (Lakhs)		
	1981	1991	2001	1981	1991	2001
Rural						
Male	59.24	58.28	59.38	96.7	108.2	104.0
Female	33.55	38.50	41.33	54.1	70.1	71.8
Persons	46.48	48.49	50.39	150.8	178.3	175.8
Urban						
Male	51.25	52.78	56.37	41.8	51.4	77.6
Female	11.97	13.10	18.42	9.3	12.2	24.8
Persons	32.05	33.34	37.59	51.1	63.6	102.4
Total						
Male	56.58	56.39	58.96	138.5	159.6	181.6
Female	26.52	29.89	31.32	63.4	82.4	96.6
Persons	41.73	43.31	44.78	201.9	241.9	278.2

Source: Census 1981, 1991 and 2001.

According to Population Census 2001, out of 278 lakh total workers, total female workers accounted to 97 lakhs. The respective figures for 1991 Census were 242 lakhs and 82 lakhs.

10. Health and Nutrition:

The Government assigns a high priority for improving the health status of the women folk and children through the implementation of a number of health schemes. The Tamil Nadu Integrated Nutrition Programme, Integrated Child Development Programme, Chief Minister's Mid-day Meal Scheme and Centrally-Sponsored Pradhan Manthiri Gramodaya Yojana has been catering to the health requirements of the vulnerable women and children. Owing to effective implementation of this nutrition projects, the degree of malnutrition and under-nutrition have shown a steady decline through time.

The Reproductive and Child Health Programme, 1997 is focusing on fertility regulation, safe motherhood, child survival, reproductive track infection, etc. For enhancing the health status of the school children, the Government has been implementing a scheme known as School Children Health Programme. This programme aims at diagnosing diseases and prescribing appropriate medicines and making referrals to the upper health institutions. All these health and nutrition programmes are being implemented to improve the health and nutritional status of the vulnerable sections of women.

In order to combat malnutrition a Nutrition Policy was evolved on 12th November, 2003 aiming at making the State malnutrition free. An innovative feature of the scheme stipulates that powders of drumstick and curry leaves in Aganwadi meals will be provided to overcome Vitamin 'A' deficiency. Following a life cycle approach from pregnancy to maternity and childhood to adulthood, the policy is directed to remove malnutrition from all stages of life. It is contemplated to provide family welfare counseling to surmount malnutrition from pregnant women, lactating mothers and children aged below three. A part of the policy is to effect behavioral change to ensure smooth introduction of nutrition-related programmes.

11. Legal Status:

A major problem in regard to legal equality of sexes is the myriad personal laws in vogue in the country lacking uniformity. There is still no uniform Civil Code. The resultant effect is the persistent discrimination between sexes, the degree of discrimination depending on mere incident of birth in a particular home.

The absence of an effective enforcement mechanism tends to make the law ineffective even in areas where women have equal rights with men. Lack of awareness among many women on the rights conferred on them legally, coupled with traditional outlook and fear of societal disapproval, have tended to perpetuate sex discrimination.

12. Participation in PRI:

Out of 12584 elected Village Panchayat Presidents, female representatives constituted 34 per cent. They formed 34 per cent out of 97026 elected ward members. It shows that the women folk are capable of taking important decisions in democratic governance and formulating suitable schemes to fill the gaps in the development requirements of the villages. In addition to participation in Local Bodies, women are occupying coveted posts. It is also a measure of emancipation of women in the State.