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RATNA PRASAD MULTIDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH & EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY [REGD]
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NGOS - A STEPPING STONE TO WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN THENI DISTRICT

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Abstract: Our Ex. President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam has rightly observed "Empowering Women is a prerequisite for creating a good nation, when women are empowered, society with stability is assured. Empowerment of women are essential as their thoughts and their value systems lead the development of a good family, good society and ultimately a good nation". Women need to be empowered economically, socially and politically to take their rightful place on an equal footing with men for a prosperous nation. Women play an important role both in home and in community. Theni is one of the Southwestern districts of Tamil Nadu State. The present position of women in rural areas (Theni District) is mounting, as they gained some socio and economic power through the Non Governmental Organizations. The Non Government Organizations in modern days plays a vital role in the empowerment of women community. Considering this, in what way the Non Government Organizations help to women folk's development in this district. NGOs have the potential to be significant vehicles of empowerment because of their ability to reach the grass roots.

Keywords: NGO, Women Empowerment, socio- economic, Theni District.

Introduction: The word "Empowerment" means "giving power". According to the International Encyclopedia (1999), power means having the capacity and economic goals or status. Therefore, women empowerment means giving the capacity and means to direct women's life towards desired goals. For realizing the objective of empowering women, they need to be liberated from discrimination and exploitation, unless women have access to decisions that affect and influence their lives, policies and programmes will continuously fail to integrate them into the mainstream of development. Empowerment of women would mean equipping women to be economically independent and personally self-reliant with a positive self-esteem to enable them to face any difficulties situation. Moreover, they should be able to contribute to the development activities of the country. The empowered women should be able to participate in the process of decision-making. The Indian woman has passed through various phases of civilization like women in other countries. But her condition became pitiable since the 17th century because of certain historical reasons. With the advent of the British rule in India a new social era emerged, and particularly after independence, all round efforts have been made to promote the welfare of women in the country. Women's empowerment is essentially an effort to rectify the imbalance and attain gender equity. The year 2001 has been declared as the 'International Women's Empowerment Year' by the United Nations. Simultaneously the government of India has also recognized the same year as "Women's Empowerment year. In order to make women empowered a policy was announced as well. The goal of this policy is to bring about the advancement, development and empowerment of women. Women need to be empowered economically, socially and politically to take their rightful place on an equal

footing with men for a prosperous nation. In Theni district, majority of women hail from the rural areas and they contribute a good deal towards the development of the nation. The NGOs play a key or prominent role in uplifting the status of women in Theni district.

Empowerment of Women through NGOs in Theni district: Theni is one of the Southwestern districts of Tamil Nadu State. It has been formed after bifurcation from east while Madurai District as per G.O. Ms. NO. 679 Revenue Department Dated: 25.07.1996. Consequent on the bifurcation, one new Revenue Division with headquarters at Uthamapalayam and two new Taluks at Theni and Bodinaickanur were also created with effect from 01.01.1997. Theni lies at the foot of the Western Ghats and bounded by the Dindigul district to the North, Madurai district to the East, Virudhunagar District to the South West and Kerala State to the West. The district has a fertile valley and the lands are irrigated by the Periyar, Vagai, and Manjalar river systems. The term 'Voluntary agencies refers to non-governmental organizations (NGO's) which originate and function independently outside the governmental systems, having service as their primary concern. The Non-Government organizations act as a link between the government and the people. They are formed by individuals or a group of individuals or by some institutions. They generally get registered themselves under Indian Trust Act 1886 or societies Registration Act, 1975. In Theni district several NGOs are involved in poverty alleviation and income-generating activities among the rural by instilling in them the concept of Women Empowerment. There are several NGOs working for the empowerment of women in this district. Maitri Society, AWDS, Vaigai Mahalir Iyakkam, ANGEL, SRDPE, AHMT, SARWODEEP, CHANARD,

Mahasakthi Trust, NESAM, MMS, GREEN are the 12 approved NGOs are interested in partnering with TNCDW for implementation of Mahalir Thittam in Theni district. A part from these NGOs a number of non approved NGOs are also working for the empowerment of women. The women are slowly motivated by internal factors such as the family background, educational background and the desire to do something independently. The present position of women in rural areas (Theni District) is mounting, as they gained some socio and economic power through the NGOs.

Social Empowerment: Social empowerment means equal status participation and powers of decision – making of women in household level. One of the biggest problems, facing women in Theni district is a sense of insecurity. As long as women feel insecure, they cannot come up in life. The economic independence creates confidence and provides social setup and social security. Early marriage is also another issue in this area. As awareness programmes given by the NGOs the early marriages were stopped with the support of social welfare department. Now more girls are continuing their education in different schools. NGOs help in stopping forced marriage, harassment by husband or in-laws, dowry fight etc. Special training programmes are arranged for the members of the women association to learn about herbal medicine, traditional folk medical practice, nature cure methods, natural family planning, AIDS awareness, reproductive tract disorders and damages due to frequent child births, child care and cleanliness of the surrounding. In addition, medical camps for general ailments, eye diseases, skin problems and respiratory illnesses are conducted regularly. With the purpose of controlling the atrocities against women in the villages, separate VAW (Violence Against Women) committees were formed and these committees started identifying the issues and dealing with the help of their own federation. Leadership training programs are organized to the members of these committees. In order to prevent the killing of female babies, the pregnant mothers (those who have 1 or 2 girl children) were kept under vigil watch by the VAW committee till their confinement. Issues such as domestic violence, sexual harassment, kandhuvatti, untouchability, property rights and vulnerability are addressed. Women's socio economic position is slowly improved. They contribute more awareness campaign for women especially HIV/AIDS. prevention of Mother Child HIV infection, Blood donation awareness, female infanticide child labour prevention etc.

Economic empowerment: Economic empowerment has changed the lives of many people including the poorest women, by providing them economic gain on

an on-going and sustained basis. Without economic empowerment, social and political empowerment has little relevance. Economic empowerment gives women control over money and assets and access to the opportunity they need for success. When women control their livelihood the whole family benefits. Our President **Pranab Mukherjee** said that at Rastrapati Bhavan, in New Delhi on 19th February 2013, as poor women were often incapacitated to act individually, social mobilization for their economic redemption was a critical necessity. "Participatory institution building through self-help groups has been found to be one of the most effective tools for the empowerment of women in developing countries." The concept of Self Help Groups and the method of approach has reached Tamil Nadu through NABARD scheme in 1989. Mahalir Thittam a programme focusing on formation of women SHGs and their capacity building is being implemented by the Tamil Nadu Corporation for Development of Women (TNCDW) through a network of Non-Governmental Organisation (NGOs). The Mahalir Thittam Project was implemented in Theni district from the year 1997 with the participation of NGOs. The objective of the scheme is to improve the socio economic development of women living below poverty line in Theni District. There are 12 approved NGOs are interested in partnering with TNCDW for implementation of Mahalir Thittam in Theni district. In Theni District during the ancient period most of the women did not come out of their home for public services. But after efforts taken by the NGOs women come out of their home and work for living and social reforms. So they have formed many Self Help Groups. These organizations are formed where women get an opportunity to come into contact with other women to develop their knowledge and create awareness about different socio- economic phenomena, to exchange their views and increase efficiency and so on. The NGOs develop management skills among members of the Self Help Groups at the grass-root level. They help them to utilize the indigenous knowledge of management through the concept of Self Help Groups.

The SHGs are a media for the development of savings habit among the women folk. It helps to increase an income of the family. The savings are kept with a bank. This common fund is in the name of the SHGs. Usually, the number of members in one SHG does not exceed twenty. Women are assisted for income generation in a number of ways by NGOs. They are given financial assistance directly or facilitated by NGO functionaries. Many NGOs have special entrepreneurial development programmes under which they conduct training programmes to help women develop entrepreneurial motivation and business acumen. At present nearly 8550 Self Help

Groups are working in this district. The Self Help Group really helps the women to participate in organized activities apart from helping members to mobilize funds. Even with little education skill women got financial assistance from Banks for various entrepreneurial activities as setting up of petty shops, making pickles, handicraft, tailoring units, vegetable shops, herbal products making, ornaments making and the like. These activities have been providing economic empowerment in many respects.

Educational empowerment: Education would empower women to achieve many social psychological, economic and political dreams. Education can be an effective tool for women's empowerment. It enables rural women to acquire new knowledge and technology required for improving and developing their tasks in all fields. The development of a society depends on the development of women. Education is the key to development, the best asset that can be given to women to make them realize their self-work and augment their resources. Women's education is still

given a secondary place in Theni district. Families still give importance to educate the male children first and then think of educating the female children. The social system is one of the major reasons for girls being not educated because the parents think that the money invested in the girl's education has no returns for them. Female literacy is considered to be the most sensitive index of social development. NGOs are arranging functional Literacy programmes to their adopted area and schools. It is strongly believed that providing education to women who have been denied opportunities in this area hitherto would bring about the desired changes. A vast majority of the student's dropout either at the 10th level or at the 12th level. Intense efforts are being made by NGOs to enhance the enrolment of women at all levels of education, including higher education. They organized literacy awareness programme in their adopted village schools and facilitate various range of training programs for the development of women in Theni district. According to the 2011 census the female literacy rate is raised through government and nongovernmental organization.

Literacy rate by resident and sex (in numbers)(Theni District)

Sl. No	Taluk Name	Total Literacy			Rural			Urban		
		Persons	Male	Female	Persons	Male	Female	Persons	Male	Female
1	Andipatti	136329	77768	58561	115403	66504	48899	20926	11264	9662
2	Theni	148172	80153	68019	51788	28928	22860	96384	51225	45159
3	Periyakulam	151321	83524	67797	67943	38211	29732	83378	45313	38065
4	Bodinayakanur	126106	69748	56358	45826	26202	19624	80280	43546	36734
5	Uthamapalayam	308152	168210	139942	95690	53725	41965	212462	114485	97977
6	District Total	870080	479403	390677	376650	213570	163080	493430	265833	227597

Source: Census of India 2011

Political empowerment: Rural women are subjected to some hindrances, which impose limitations on their potential to play their role effectively. Women are said to have equal status in the society, but when it comes to actual decision-making, men have final say while women have to accept a subservient status. Many problems of women can be solved easily by proper counseling and guidance. Women are generally ignorant of laws rules and regulations. NGOs conducted Capacity building training programs to augment their capacity. They are encouraging the women to take major role in the overall development of their own community. Equipping women with political awareness so as to enable them participate in the political process of the country starting with participation of women in local governance (Panchayat Raj Institution) Strengthening Gram Sabha, contesting for ward members, president, union councilors. The Women Development Programme and women's federations work to ensure human rights for women and their families. In addition to the above work, the women

have campaigned for prohibition of liquor shops, 33 per cent reservation for women in elected posts and to ensure proper BPL lists. Eventhough they face problems in doing this, they were stubborn in bringing some changes in the life of women. The status of women will improve if women are made to take up responsibilities in public activities by obligatory or statutory means. NGOs moulds the women as responsible citizens of the country by achieving social and economic status.

Findings and suggestions: Women got more financial assistance from banks through NGOs. Even though NGOs may increase the amount of credit facilities available to women entrepreneurs so that women can access credit ranging according to their needs and requirements. The presence of SHGs in this area has created a remarkable change on the part of women and the society's outlook towards women has also been changed. More educational facilities and schemes should be extended to women folk from government part. Many NGOs are contributing to entrepreneurship development in this area. The

NGOs have to more focus on the political empowerment of women, as the study found that political empowerment in this areas were found to be low.

Conclusion: NGOs have done spectacular works in the field of rural development such as community health, agriculture, adult education, community organization, sangam-formation, promotion of Self-Help Groups, networking etc. The true success of

NGO is not the receipt of national awards or getting international rewards but only the victory to the women over their poverty and injustices. NGOs have the potential to be significant vehicles of empowerment because of their ability to reach the grass roots. Hence, NGOs are considered as a stepping stone to women empowerment in Theni district.

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