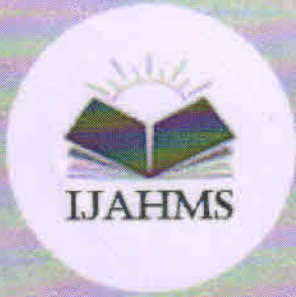


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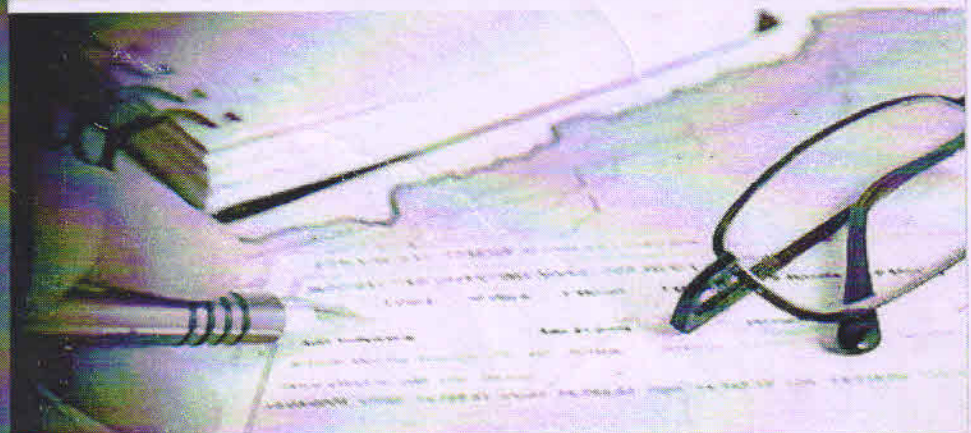
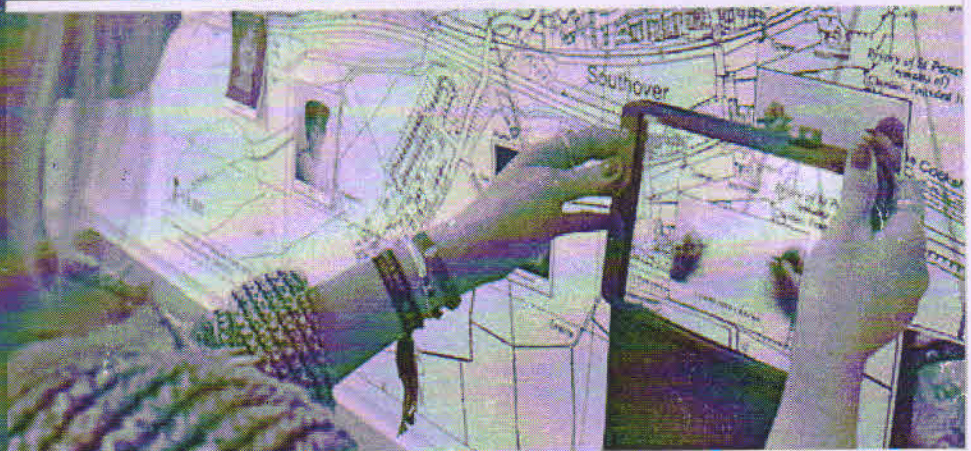
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Women Empowerment through Education in Theni District

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ABSTRACT:

Empowerment of Women and their educational and economic status are inextricably linked with each other. Education enables women to take advantage of all the opportunities available. 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. Theni is one of the Southwestern districts of Tamil Nadu State. Women's education is still given a secondary place in Theni district. Women can be empowered by giving them education. So, intense efforts were made to enhance the enrolment of women at all levels of education, including higher education by government and non - governmental organizations. Over the past two decades, women have made substantial educational progress in this district.

Keywords: *Women empowerment, education, Theni district.*

INTRODUCTION

Women make up 52% of our country's population. Hence there can be no progress unless their needs and interests are fully met. Empowerment would not hold any meaning unless they are made strong, alert and aware of their equal status in the society. Policies should be framed to bring them into the mainstream of society. It is important to educate the women. The need of hour is to improve female literacy as education holds the key to development. Empowerment would become more relevant, if women are educated, better informed and can take rational decisions. It is also necessary to sensitize the other sex towards women. Education is the most important instrument for human resources development. Education of women, therefore, occupies top priority amongst various measures taken to improve the status of women in India.

In ancient India, particularly during the Vedic age, women enjoyed a higher status in home as well as outside. In Vedic literature, the most remarkable feature was the higher level of cultural and social status of women. Women were well educated and had right to study Vedas and participate in all vital decision making processes. Unfortunately, in later period women lost their original position, because of slip-down in the field of women education. During the Pre-British era, education was linked to the socio-religious institutions, reinforcing the patriarchal social structure. Opportunities for formal education were almost denied to women due to child marriage, purda system and the orthodox thinking of the parents as well as the society. Certain social customs, traditions like practice of sati, polygamy, enforced widowhood, dowry system, child marriage, etc, reduced women to a position of liability. There were open criticism from all the sections of the society to girl's education and freedom.

During the British period, education became a tool of colonial power, enabling a small minority to have access to education, and all the benefits it entailed. The social reformers of the 19th

century raised the demand for women's transformation but to make them more capable of fulfilling their traditional roles. The Christian missionaries were the first to take interest in girl's education.

The lack of education is the mainly responsible for which women are the sufferer, more than men. The lack of education means the lack of self-reliance, self-confidence for which women are not able to come out their problems. So educating a woman means educating a family. As Gandhi said 'Educate a woman and she educates the whole family'. Women need to understand that education is the most powerful weapon to overcome superstitions, social evils, outdated customs, narrow vision and wrong notions. Gandhiji rightly pointed out that 'confinement of women to routine household jobs and the denial of opportunities for productive work and decision making would do irreparable damage to the nation. Education helps to transform the status of women. It is the most important instrument for human resource development.

After independence, provisions were made in the Indian constitution to provide equal rights and opportunities of socio-economic development and betterment of living for men and women. In view of bringing improvements in the socio-economic condition of women efforts were made to maximize the participation of women in different educational levels, with the notion that education is the most important instrument to bring awareness about their rights, social status. Education in India is constrained by the socio-economic conditions of the people, their attitudes, values and culture.

The Indian Education Commission (1964 -66) has recommended that the education of girls should receive emphasis not only on grounds of social justice but also on grounds of accelerated social transformation. The National Policy on Education (1986) is a landmark in the approach to women's education. It has strongly stated that the educational system must play a positive interventionist role in changing social values and attitudes that obstruct women's rights and equal participation not merely in all respects of development but even in education. The National Education System will play a positive interventionist role in the empowerment of women.

Tamil Nadu has been consistently in the forefront in the implementation of educational programmes over the years. After the completion of Seventh five year plan Tamil Nadu has witnessed some improvement in female literacy levels. Imbalances also exist in the literacy levels in different parts of Tamil Nadu.

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.

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, Vaigai, and Manjalar river systems.

In the sphere of education, girl children especially in the rural areas in Theni district are rarely sent to schools. Families still give importance to educate the male children first and then think of educating the female children. Some other factors were responsible for low enrolment. They are tied down to domestic chores, The requirement for older girls to stay at home to take care of siblings when mothers are away at work, helping their mothers in cooking, fetching water, tending cattle, early marriage of girls and so on. They are made to enter into a life of responsibilities at a very early age. Conservative cultural values, coupled with assumption of domestic responsibilities dictate the girl child's withdrawal from formal education.

Parents living in rural areas were not very much in favour of education for girls. They wanted them only to read and write and then assume the responsibility of household work. The social system is one of the major reasons for girls being not educated. After marriage a girl leaves her parent's house and goes to her husband's house. The parents think that the money invested in the girl's education has no returns for them. Parents decide to invest in education of the male child rather than the girl child. Empowerment of Women and their educational and economic status are inextricably linked with each other. Education enables women to take advantage of all the opportunities available. When women have the necessary knowledge and skills, they can open any door, and attain equal footing with men. Women can only attain equal footing with men if there is equality of opportunity.

A woman is empowered when she is able to make the best of her own life. A woman is empowered when she has literacy, education, productive skills, access to capital, confidence in herself, and so on. Then she can 'get ahead' on the basis of her own qualifications and ability. Such a woman has been empowered. In Theni district there are 8 Blocks and 5 Municipalities.

Percentage of Literacy rate according to 2001 Census in Theni District (Block wise)

Name of the Block	Male	Female
Theni	56.39	43.61
Periyakulam	57.44	42.56
Cumbum	56.81	43.19
Uthamapalayam	56.54	43.46
Aundipatty	58.88	41.12
K.Myladumparai	61.84	38.16
Bodinayakanur	57.45	42.55
Chinnamanur	57.57	42.43

Female literacy is low when compare to male literacy. Female dropouts are high. Female literacy is considered to be the most sensitive index of social development. 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 girls' dropout either at the 10th level or at the 12th level.

Another major reason put forward is that parents are still conservative and do not approve of boys and girls mixing freely. They are apprehensive about the girls' 'safety' and 'security.'

Parents have inhibitions and resistance and would not permit a girl to join the co-educational schools and colleges. Sufficient schools and colleges for girls do not exist everywhere particularly in rural area. It is very difficult to send their daughters to get education. So the female literacy rates are very low when compare to male literacy.

Education can be an effective tool for women's empowerment. It enables the rural women to acquire new knowledge and technology required for improving and developing their tasks in all fields. So, intense efforts were made to enhance the enrolment of women at all levels of education, including higher education by government and non - governmental organizations. They organized functional literacy awareness programme to needed area, and facilitate various range of training programmes for the development of women in Theni district.

Over the past two decades, women have made substantial educational progress in this district. The large gaps between the education levels of women and men that were evident in the early 1990s have essentially disappeared for the younger generation.

Percentage of Literacy rate according to 2011 Census in Theni District (Block wise)

S. No	Name of the Block	Male	Female	Total
1	Theni	80	68	74
2	Aundipatti	75	59	67
3	Myladumparai	67	51	59
4	Periyakulam	76	63	69
5	Bodi	77	62	70
6	Chinnamanur	76	62	69
7	Uthamapalayam	78	65	71
8	Cumbum	78	65	71

Compare to 2001 census the female literacy rate is raised in 2011 census in this district by various measures taken by Government and non - governmental organizations.

Education can give freedom to women from the clutches of poverty, oppression, exploitation and violence. Educated women can contribute to the economic condition of their homes and improve the standard of living of their families. Education has highlighted social awareness among women both for themselves as well as for their children. As women come out of their homes to become literates, they acquire a heightened sense of self-awareness and desire to gain knowledge. Education has sought to empower them as to decision making about themselves, their families and their communities. Education has motivated and encouraged women to educate their children particularly their girl children. At present, there is an increasing awareness, at all levels, of the need to empower women in order to raise their status through education.

In spite of concerted efforts to improve the enrolment of girls and provide adult education for women, their educational status is still far from satisfactory. Only few schools and colleges are functioning in this area especially for girls. Awareness among the parents about female higher education should be needed.

Women's education should not create only good wives and mothers as expected in the past, but also enabled them to become qualified women as well as responsible citizens who are capable of making independent decisions. Each and every woman should have the awareness of their rights and responsibilities in the society and should have adequate opportunities to get involved in the social activities at the national level. It can be achieved only through 100 % female literacy in this area.

CONCLUSION

Women can be empowered by giving them education. To gain more power they need more skills, and more knowledge of how society works. Therefore education will lead to empowerment. In Theni district education has played a very significant role in changing and emancipating the position and status of women in society. Education would empower women to achieve many social psychological, economic and political dreams. In recent times, education has attained immense importance as a source of status mobility and consequent social change.

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