

**A Major Research Project on
NGOs in Women Empowerment – A Geospatial Study
in Usilampatti Taluk Madurai District, Tamil Nadu**

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The word ‘woman’ has great significance right from the very existence of mankind. The importance of women can be judged by their multiple roles as mother, sister, wife, etc. They play an important role in determining the destiny of a nation. Therefore, providing recognition to them in the society and appreciating their greater involvement in socio-economic and political affairs have become all the more important. Sri Sri Ravi Shankar has quoted “*The role of women in the development of society is of utmost importance. Infact, it is the only thing that determines whether a society is strong and harmonious, or otherwise, women are the backbone of society.*” Women are an integral part of society. But even after so many years of independence, women in India continue to suffer socially as well as economically at different levels and in different forms. India is a society where males are mainly dominating. In the modern times, women in India are given freedom and rights such as freedom of expression and equality, as well as right to get education.

Women empowerment is multi-dimensional in its approach and covers social, political, economic and social aspects. Women empowerment in India is heavily dependent on many different variables that include geographical location (rural/urban), educational status, social status (caste and class) and age. Policies on women empowerment exist at national, state and local levels in many sectors including health, education, economic opportunities, gender-based violence and political participation. The scope and coverage of the schemes launched have been expanding that include initiatives for economic and social empowerment of women for securing gender equality.

Significance and Selection of the Study Area:

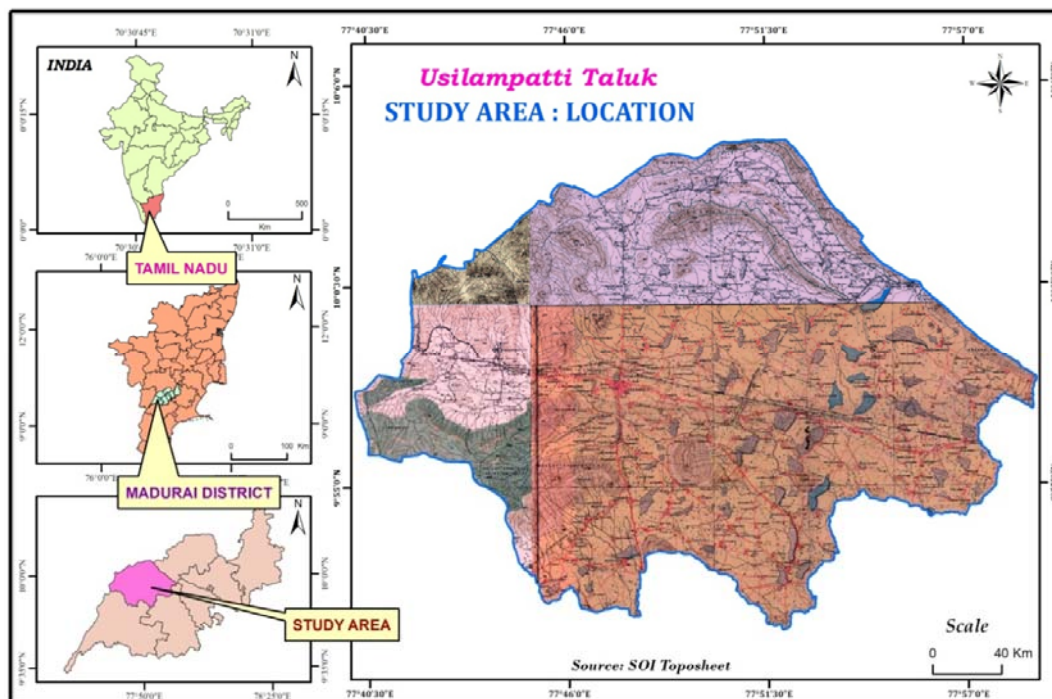
In India as in many other countries of the world, there is a vast difference between the idealized concept of women and the real life situation in which women find themselves. Today women in the Indian society have been facing challenges in terms of illiteracy, exploitation, unemployment, female infanticide, child marriage, sati, dowry, prostitution, rape, widowhood, devadasi system, harassment by husbands, nagging and purdah system. All these have prevented Indian women from attaining greater heights. In traditional societies, even more than elsewhere, women empowerment does not occur easily or in overnight. In the Indian context, there was evidence of such change emerging, to which the project had apparently contributed.

In rural India, where a lot of people do not have access to sex determination facilities, female infanticide is shockingly widespread. Women are considered a burden to the society due to several factors. Therefore, they are not even given a chance to live and come up in society. As soon as a female baby is born she is immediately killed so that she and others can escape the problems of life. The parents wait until the mother gives birth, and when they find out that a daughter is born, they go ahead and kill the baby by adopting various means such as strangling the baby, giving her poison, dumping her in a garbage bin, drowning her, burying her alive, starving her, stuffing her mouth with salt, or leaving her outdoors overnight to die out of cold. This is the common practice prevailed against the birth of female new born where the mothers are voiceless against this crime.

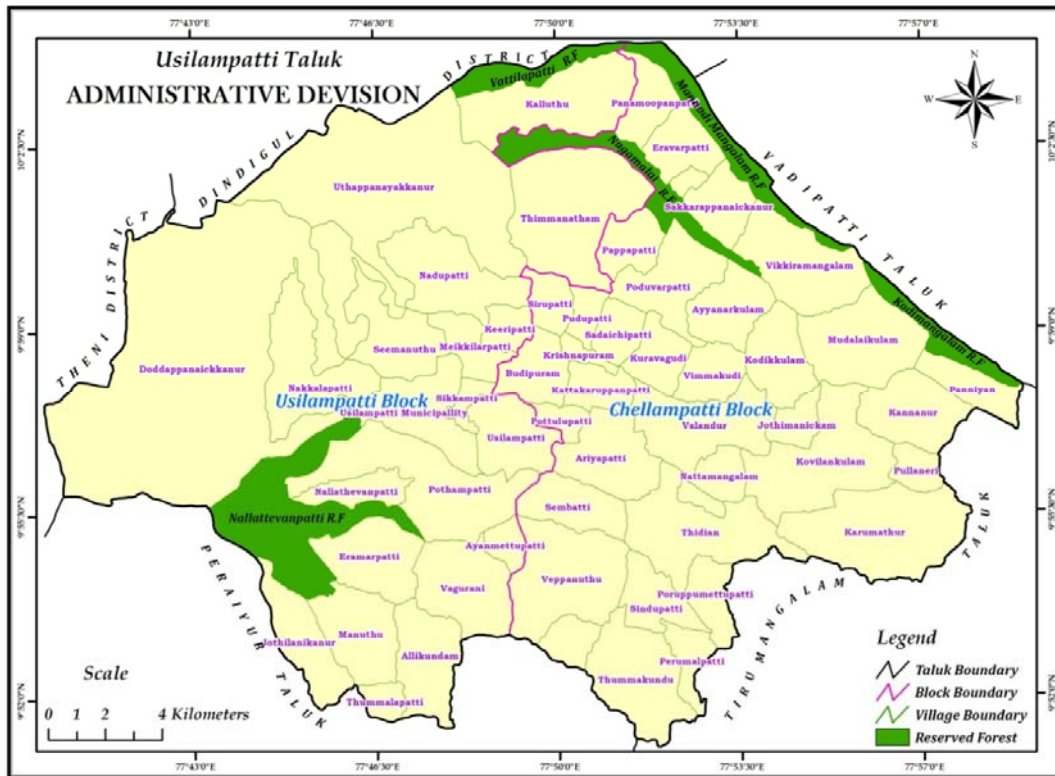
Women in rural areas need support to organize and be brought into all levels of decision-making, agenda-setting and programme design and implementation as expert stakeholders. To develop more effective policies and programmes for rural development and rural women's empowerment, it is necessary to strengthen countries' capacity to collect and analyze data that are disaggregated by sex and age as well as by rural and urban population. Keeping this in mind, the researcher has chosen Usilampatti taluk which is one of the backward areas regarding the status of women, taken as the study area to identify the NGOs programmes on women empowerment with the help of the data collected from voluntary organizations involved in rural development.

Geographical Setting of the Area

Usilampattitaluk in Madurai district. Usilampatti taluk in Madurai District is one the backward taluks in Tamilnadu both in terms of literacy and economic development. The earlier research studies made in Usilampattitaluk had highlighted that Usilampatti lacked many aspects especially related to the societal status of women such as literacy, infant mortality, poor sex ratio, female infanticide and feticide.



The geographical environment consists of distribution and characteristics of different types of economic, social, and cultural activities of study area Usilampatti taluk which is located in Madurai District, Tamil Nadu. Usilampatti Taluk is located at Madurai District between 9°51'5"North latitude and 10°4'28" North latitude and between 77°40'7"East longitude and 77°58'59" East longitude. It has an average elevation of 201mts. Its total geographical area is 501.368 sq.km. This taluk consist of 5 firkas namely Usilampatti, Uthappanaikanur, Valandur, Karumathur and Sindhupatti and 2 blocks namely Usilampatti and Chellampatti and 54 revenue villages which includes 357 hamlets and 47 revenue panchayats and one town panchayat namely Usilampatti under its administrative capacity. Usilampatti taluk is bordered by Dindigul district in the north, Vadipatti taluk in the north east, Thirumangalam taluk in the South east, Sedapatti taluk in the south and Theni district in the west. The National Highways No.49 passes through this taluk in the central part connecting the districts of Madurai in the east and Theni on the west in Tamilnadu and extends upto Kerala state. This taluk is located at 40 Kms away from the Madurai city and most of the areas are rural by nature. Usilampatti taluk is seen in western part hilly and rugged topography and eastern part shows the plain regions. Usilampatti taluk has no prominent perennial river flow. The taluk is drained mostly by non-perennial streams and rivers in the western region and more number of tanks in the eastern part. Usilampatti taluk also experiences semi-arid tropical monsoon type of climate.



The economic condition of Usilampatti taluk is mainly determined by agricultural activities. Agriculture is the main occupation, the higher share of workers are engaged in primary activities. In Usilampatti taluk out of the 54 villages, 20 villages are registered with high share of primary workers to the total workers.

Usilampatti taluk has got a good educational facility and well served by health care facilities. There is 1 Government hospital, 7 Primary Health Centers and 41 Health Sub Centers and 24 hours emergency care facility are functioning. In Usilampatti taluk there are totally 260 educational institutions including primary, middle, high, higher secondary and matriculation schools. Colleges and other technical institutions are also serving the needs of the population. There are 2 Arts and Science colleges as well as 13 other private technical institutions located in Usilampatti taluk. In Usilampatti taluk most of the educational institutions in all levels are under the management of Kallar welfare department.

In Usilampatti taluk there are 13 banking facilities in total and they include nationalized and co-operative societies. Among the Usilampatti block which is in the leading position has 9 banks. The banking and financial establishments are highly proportional to the agricultural activities of the study area and the demand for the financial requirement for SHG.

Demographic characteristics and female participation of the study area has been studied through population census. The broad inferences made by the study are given below:

- The distribution of population of Usilampatti taluk is very uneven. According to 2011 census the total population is 1,95,236.
- As per 2011 census female population accounted 95,432 while male population accounted 99,804.
- Population density is low in 5 villages namely Doddappanaickanur, Uthapanaickanur, Eramarpatti, Poduvarpatti and Perumalpatti. It is worth observing that these villages are located at the hilly and rugged topography areas and the nearby reserved forest areas.
- Usilampatti taluk reported the lowest child sex ratio (884) than the Madurai district (939), State (946) and Nation (914).
- The average child sex ratio of the population in the age group 0-6 years has been registered as 778 in 1991 and 884 in 2011.
- The study area has lower sex ratio (959) than both the state and district that is 995 and 990 in 2011.
- In the study area sex ratio witnessed significantly increasing trends that 945 females per thousand males during 1981, where as 959 females per thousand males during 2011.
- Out of 54 villages only 10 villages have high sex ratio of more than 1000 namely Perumalpatti, Sirupatti, Sikkampatti, Kattakaruppanpatti, Poduvarpatti, Usilampatti, Jothimanicam, Kuravakudi, Pothampatti and Eravarpatti.
- 6 villages namely Ayanmetupatti, Pappapatti, Kannanur, Karumathur, Allikundam and Jothinaickanoor have low sex ratio of less than 900 females per 1000 males.
- Literacy is an important indicator of social and economic development. Usilampatti taluk accounts low female literacy (43%) than the average literacy rates in the District (77.2%), State (73.8%), and the Nation (65.5%).
- The female literacy rate has 32% during 1981 and increased in 43% in 2011
- There are 40 villages accounted 25%-37% of female literacy rate in 2011.
- The low child sex ratio, low sex ratio and low non workers are seen in four villages namely Allikundam, Ayanmettupatti, Karumathur and Pappapatti.
- Low child sex ratio and low SC/ST population accounted in Kalluthu and Thimmanatham villages.

- High literacy and high sex ratio are seen in Jothimanickam, Kattakaruppanpatti, Kuruvakudi, Perumalpatti, Pothampatti, Sikkampatti and Usilampatti
- High literacy and high household workers are found in Krishnapuram, Nadupatti, Poruppumethupatti, Pothampatti, Pottulupatti, Sadaichipatti, Sikkampatti, Thidian, Thimmanatham and Thummalapatti.
- The study area from the year 1991 to 2001, the women development was in decreasing trend and it may be observed that the female infanticide is common in the study area. So sex ratio, main workers, primary workers and non workers also decreased from the year 1991 to 2001. At the same time NGOs motivated to women and form the Self Help Group to develop the economic status for women and create awareness and prevent female infanticide, educational development and work force between the years 1991 to 2005. This is the main reason for the increase of the high sex ratio, literacy, main workers, primary workers and non workers during the year 2011. In 2011 only 6 villages have registered low sex ratio of below 900. Consider this an attempt to study the role of NGOs in women empowerment through the analysis of SHGs socio-economic characteristics and the development of socio-economic empowerment of women in the study area will be discussed.

NGOs and its Role:

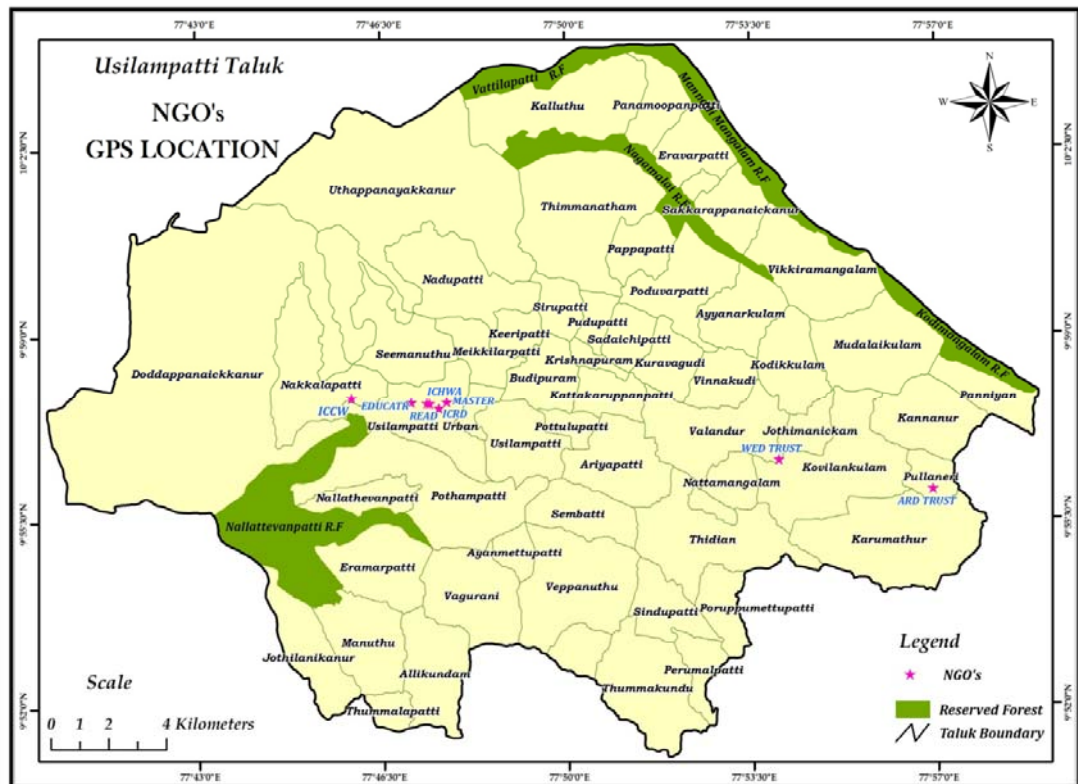
Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in India have a rich and vibrant history, but one which has been characterized by a fluid relationship with the state and state instrumentalities. Over the past 150 years Indian governments, both colonial and postcolonial, have played a key role in shaping Indian NGOs, both in terms of how they function in society and their often fraught relationships with the state. For development NGOs, the broader community aspirations they promote include alleviating poverty, addressing marginalization, achieving social justice and promoting respect for human rights. Women Empowerment has been the central agenda for both government and NGO's. Voluntary action promoted by voluntary agencies engaged in development play a significant role at the grass roots level in the regions of the success of rural development depends upon the active participation of the people through Non Government Organizations. The various roles of NGOs are like Educating the Rural Women, Supplementation of Government Efforts, Efforts Organizing the Rural Women, Ensure Women's Participation in their empowerment, Mobilizing the optimum Resources, Promoting Rural Leadership, Representing the Rural Women, Promoting Technology in Rural areas, Activating the Rural Delivery System,

Providing effective & efficient Training to Rural Women etc. NGO and SHG dominate and fruitful success of the women empowerment needs to occur along multiple dimensions including: economic, socio-cultural, legal, political and psychological.

The role of NGOs inferences made by the study is given below:

- The practice of female infanticide was high in Tamil Nadu first identified in Usilampatti Taluk of Madurai District in 1986. Over the past two decades, the region has attracted wide attention due to the prevalence of the practice of female infanticide in Usilampatti Taluk.
- The urgent need for preventing Female Infanticide, Foeticide and all forms of violence against women, NGOs are working for the development and upliftment of women and female children.
- NGOs have understood the needs of the women to creating awareness about their rights, socio-economic empowerment, create health awareness and general sensitization through education, employment etc and mobilizing them as well as developing in them appropriate motivation and leadership to realize those rights cannot be little. Non-governmental organizations are playing a significant role in the empowerment of women, helping them to be independent through programmes such as socio-economic programme, vocational training and other similar programmes.
- In Usilampatti taluk 8 NGOS are identified under Mahalir Thittam and actively participated NGOs. The NGOs and its services are
- Association for Rural Development (ARD) Trust was founded in 1985. It has concentrating on 30 villages and forms the 491 Self Help Groups and it tie up with The Government of India's, Department of Science and Technology and Ministry of Food Processing Industry, and NABARD Banking.
- Indian Council for Child Welfare (ICCW) Trust was founded in the year 1988. It serves the 17 villages and it forms 371 SHGs in Usilampatti block only.
- Women's Emancipation and Development (WED) Trust was founded in 1992 and it concentrates Chellampatti block only.
- Education, Communication and Development (EDUCATR) Trust founded in 1997 and it serves 31 villages forms 356 self help groups.
- Indian Christian Rural Development (ICRD) Trust was started in 2000 serves 152 self help groups in 29 villages.

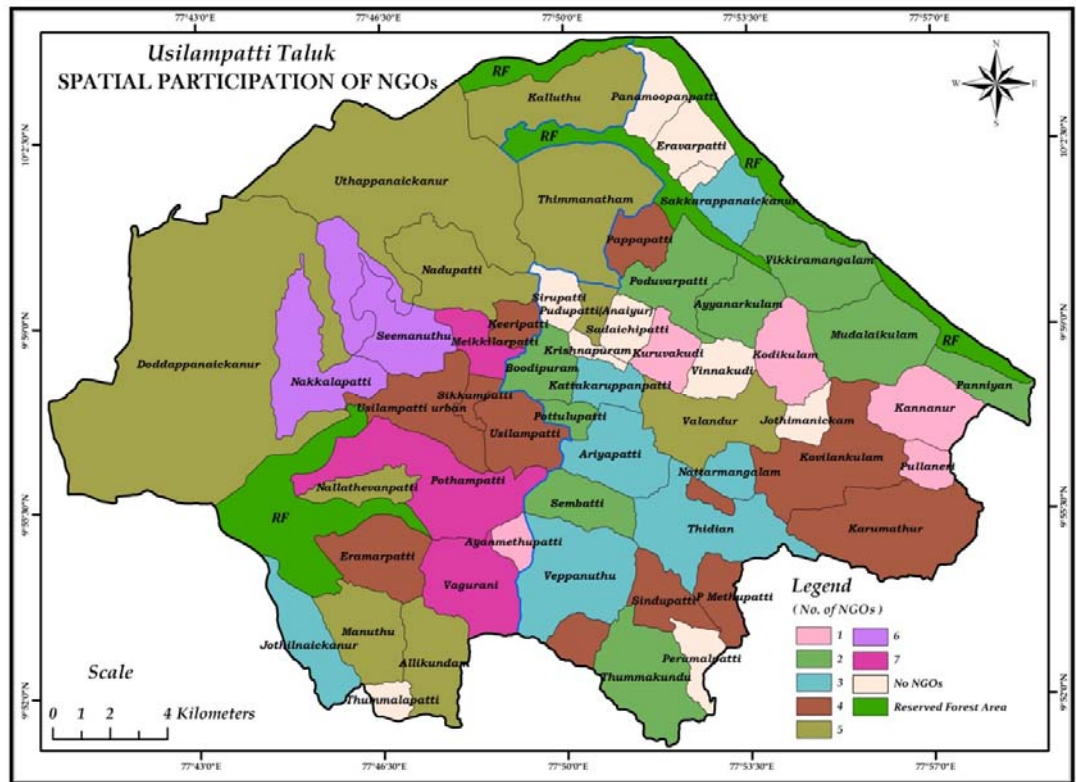
- Multi Actions for Social Transformation, Education and Rural Trust (MASTER) was founded in 2004 and it forms 265 self help groups in 28 villages of both Usilampatti and Chellampatti blocks.
- Rural Education and Awareness Development (READ) Trust was founded in 2007 and it forms 104 self help groups in 11 villages. It concentrates highly in the souther portion of the Usilampatti block.
- Indian Culture and Human Welfare Association (ICHWA) Trust was founded in 2007 and it concentrates in 18 villages and it forms 88 self help groups.



- The above 8 NGOs are concentrated almost each village of Usilampattitaluk except 9 villages namely Eravarpatti, Jothimanickam, Krishnapuram, Panamoopanpatti, Perumalpatti, Sadachipatti, Sirupatti, Thummalapatti and Vinnakudi villages. This may be due to the total population as well as female population has recorded in low level.
- 7 NGOs are concentrated in 3 villages namely Vagurani, Pothampatti and Meikilarpatti and form the 178 self help groups. NGOs like ARD and ICCW were started in 1985 and 1988 concentrated those three villages to prevent female infanticide and then the remaining NGOs are started after 1997 and concentrated

those villages to increase the child sex ratio and create awareness of women empowerment.

- Seemanathu and Nakkalapatti villages are concentrated by 6 NGOs. Seemanthu has very low child sex ratio (680) in 1991. With the help of 6 NGOs child sex ratio has increased in Seemanthu (995) in 2011.
- There are 10 villages 502 self help groups are working under 5 NGOs. Those villages are Alligundam, Kalluthu, Manuthu, Dottapanickanur, Uthapanickanur, Valandur, Thimmanatham, Nallathevanpatti, Nadupatti and Pudupatti.
- Sindupatti, Usilampatti, Usilampatti town, Karumathur, Kovilankulam, Poruppumettupatti, Sikampatti, Pappapatti, Keeripatti and Eramarpatti villages are concentrated by 4 NGOs. Those villages registered child sex ratio in 1991 between 500 and 800 but it has increased the child sex ratio with the help of NGOs to create awareness to the SHGs.
- Aryapatti, Kattakaruppanpatti, Natarmangalam, Thidian, Sakkarapanaickanur, Jothinaickanur and Veppanuthu are concentrated by 3 NGOs with 136 self help groups.
- Villages like Ayyanarkulam, Bodhipuram, Poduvarpatti, Pottulupatti, Mudalaikulam, Thummakundu, Sembatti, Panniyan and Vikramangalam have 153 self help groups with the 2 NGOs.
- Villages namely Ayanmettupatti, Kannanur, Kodikulam, Kuravakudi and Pullaneri have concentrated by only one NGO with 35 self help groups. These villages are located in the peripheral areas of the study area and those have not good transport accessibility.



- The main development approach for NGOs working with local communities that has emerged over the past 30 years is through self-help groups (SHG). The majority of NGOs working in rural areas on issues of gender and poverty is the self-help group. It is a form of savings based microfinance through self help groups.
- NGOs forms SHGs and fruitful success of the women empowerment in multi dimensions like economic, socio-cultural, legal, political and psychological. In the study area 1878 SHGs are identified under the 8 NGOs and 2250 SHG respondents are selected and interviewed simple random sampling. The findings are as follows:
- 57% of sample respondents are joining in the NGOs from the year 2006 to 2010.
- The age group between 18-35 years of the sample respondents accounted 45% while 2% are more than 60 years.
- It has been observed that the participation of respondents with secondary school level of literacy accounted 43% while 29% of the respondents are illiterates.
- An overwhelming majority (88%) of the respondents comes from individual family background and only 11% live in joint family system.
- It is found that the Hindus (99%) had a better representation than Christian and Muslims.
- Regarding the caste profile, 70% of the respondents belong to Most Backward Class.

- Majority of the respondents (62%) belongs to family income of only Rs. 2501 to 5000/-.
- The occupational status of the respondents' shows that, majority of them were cooli (40%) and agricultural labourers (28%).
- Majority of the respondents (53%) have taken loan for poultry, 22% to start business, and 14% for education for children.
- Most of sample respondents (86%) have repaid the loan on time, while 13% have repaid loan late.
- Majority of the respondents have awareness of savings and they have gone up after they became members of SHGs. Many were happy to say that savings in their name gave some social status at home and in the community.
- It is found that the respondents got awareness of toilet facilities after joining the self help groups.
- Majority of sample respondents opined that their power has increased in taking decisions after joining SHGs either inside or outside their family.
- Most of the respondents knew that reservation of seats had been made for women from the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act and they were aware political base.
- It is found that 19 presidents, 13 councilors and 142 ward members accounted in the study area. This shows that the awareness level of women empowerment is quite high.
- Self help group members participate and to discuss village problems in meetings, interact with people to identify the needs of community and implement developmental programmes.
- The SHG study concludes that by participating in SHG there was an enhanced self-economic empowerment in terms of savings, access to loan and trainings.

Conclusion:

- The study noted that NGOs are highly encourage the respondents to access formal banking institution with ease and get access to better amount of loan as compared to pre SHG period. Most of the respondents were able to attend NGOs training after joining SHG which had an impact in enabling them increase assets, improve book keeping, spend wisely, and diversify investment. Their quality of life has improved a lot, as:
- They could develop their skills and abilities in various productive activities.

- There is an increase in their income, savings and consumption.
- Increased self-reliance and self confidence have improved the ability of women to mobilize various public services for their benefit.
- They have become bold and can speak freely in front of a big crowd.
- Decision making role is important for empowerment. Majority of the respondents have involved themselves actively in decision making.
- They got high self esteem which enhances their capacity to work.
- With improvements in women's economic opportunities and their ability to take collective action, there has been a significant decline in gender based problems such as domestic violence, dowry, polygamy etc. Thus the SHGs have achieved success in bringing women to the mainstream of decision making.
- They can take their own decisions in some matters and give their suggestions in family concerns.
- NGOs not only mean access to money for women borrowers, but also they create opportunities to achieve economic and political empowerment within their homes and their communities.
- No doubt, the SHG movement in Usilampatti has been moving in the right direction this is because of NGOs participation. It is necessary to empower the women more and more in social, cultural, economic and political matters, for the interest of the family in particular and the nation in general.
- Women, through this SHG movement have asserted a dignified position in the family as well as in the society. Their decision making power has immensely enhanced not only in their family but also in the society.
- Overall there is significant impact of NGO on women of the study area. After joining the organizations, drastic changes are seen in the lifestyle of women. The study found significant difference in NGOs' efforts towards implementation of interventional measures in the area of health and to increase literacy level of women. After lots of efforts of NGOs in the area of women empowerment, still the situation is not improved at the paramount level. It can be concluded that, there is a significant role of NGO in women empowerment.

Recommendation

The detailed study and the findings of the present attempt may be treated as guidelines for the future rural women empowerment especially the role of NGOs. In light of the study results and discussion, the following recommendations were derived to the beneficiaries:

- ❖ NGOs should increase the amount of credit facilities available to women entrepreneurs so that women can access credits ranging according to their needs, requirements and improve the performance of women. Insurance scheme to SHG members must be introduced.
- ❖ Training as an intervention on its own, should be extended through appropriate strategies so as to reach and benefit as many as 100% of the women entrepreneurs.
- ❖ Even though women had undergone training, majority of respondents were lacking regular, proper and need based training which concentrate on utilizing local resources and local market. Hence, training programmes should be organized by district rural development agencies, commercial banks and NGOs keeping in view the above mentioned factors.
- ❖ Various seminars should be organized where members get a chance to exchange their views and be able to develop their group strength by interactions.
- ❖ Periodical exhibitions should be organized at national level where the products of SHGs can be displayed. This will build confidence in the members and will also act as marketing strategy.
- ❖ Besides governments efforts NGO's should provide financial assistance to the families those who live below the poverty line to start household industries.
- ❖ The NGOs have to more focus on the political empowerment of women. There is a need to train SHG members for regular orientation and training programs that will help to increase the political and management skills of women in panchayats.
- ❖ A long-term solution to women's participation in political activities rests in greater awareness about their role, responsibilities and entitlements.
- ❖ Sensitization of men, both officials and elected members is very essential for women to be able to function effectively.
- ❖ Sharing and cooperation by both men and women would result in better designing and implementation of activities for the benefit of all.
- ❖ Gender discrimination should be minimized or avoided.

- ❖ At the same time women need to gain greater role clarity and strike a balance between their household and official responsibilities.
- ❖ Government and NGOs should emphasize more on women empowerment leading to social, political and economic upliftment of poor women than just economic upliftment.

*“When women moves forward, the family moves,
the village moves and the country moves”*

Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru