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## STRENGTHENING THE SOCIAL STATUS THROUGH SELF HELPGROUPS: A STUDY IN SUGALI TRIBAL WOMEN OF CHITTOOR DISTRICT, ANDHRA PRADESH

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### ABSTRACT

Social empowerment is the process of acquiring the ability to make strategic life choices in a social context where this ability has previously been denied. Social empowerment is expressed as the expansion of freedom of choice and action. In the present study an attempt has been made to analyze the structure, conduct and performance of self help groups (SHG) and their impact on socio economic development of Sugali tribal women in Chittoor district of Andhra Pradesh, by administering a descriptive research design. The data for the present study was collected randomly from a sample of 500 Sugali women from Chittoor district, Andhra Pradesh. Detailed demographic information on socio- economic and indicators of empowerment was recorded in a structured and pretested questionnaire. 85 percent of the women in the study were married. Nuclear family type was predominant to an extent of 71 percent. Illiteracy was noticed to an extent of 31 percent. Majority possess white ration card from the Government. Landless people were existing to an extent of 24 percent. 71 percent of the members gained colony houses constructed by the Government. The formation of SHG was initiated by Government agencies to an extent of 80 percent. In the study area 93 percent of the SHG members use to have group meeting monthly once. 92 percent of the members expressed that they joined in the group to promote the culture of savings among themselves. 4 percent each joined the group for getting loan and to gain social status. Regarding the status of the women in the family after joining the SHG, around 40 percent opined an improved perception in several indicators like: status in the family, education of their girl child, prevention of child labour, personal hygiene, involvement in the joint decisions, participation in school functions and participation in the co-members family functions. Similarly at work place also an appreciable percentage of women (around 40%) gained strength and unity among the coworkers, wage opportunities, sharing of work burden, and awareness/knowledge about the safety methods. At individual level also women gained appreciation towards literacy, awareness on self reliance, improved communication skills, travel alone, knowledge about the law to protect and defend herself and fighting against evils of dowry, alcoholism, domestic violence besides gaining knowledge on gender equality. In conclusion the present study infers that self help groups have contributed substantially in pushing social status of the women.

**KEYWORDS:** Women empowerment, social status, Self help groups, Sugali Tribe



## INTRODUCTION

Women empowerment is viewed as continuum of social interrelated and mutually reinforcing components encompassing women's situation, discrimination, rights and opportunities towards gender equality, provides a sense of group identity and the power of working as group, capacity building, participation and greater control and decision making power in the home, community and society. Empowerment of women is not a one way process, it is a two way process in which women empower and get empowered. Thus empowerment of women covers improvement in social status, health, economic opportunity and more particularly political autonomy. All these enhance their decision making capacity in vital areas.

SHGs are at present playing a vital role in empowering women in all respects. It is clear, however, that women empowerment occur in specific socio-cultural context that place some women at disproportionate development. Several researches have shown that overall empowerment of women associated with socio-cultural conditions in diverse settings, especially where a women's identity and value are defined by individual status. Andhra Pradesh state in India received attention appreciation from neighbor states and across sea due to its focus on microfinance institution (MFI) and self help groups (Lavoori and Paramanik, 2014). Any institution providing economic support to the rural women generates a fruitful result of providing even social support to them by which the poverty can be eradicated (Manjunatha, 2013). Traditionally, the Scheduled Tribes have occupied the lowest positions in the Indian social hierarchy. They have been subjected to a variety of disabilities, deprivations and oppressions. In India, the pre-dominant of exploitative semi-feudal relations made the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes a target of exploitation forever. Declaring itself as a secular state, the modern India attempted to promote the interests of the vulnerable sections through different developmental schemes. Along with developmental schemes, some institutional changes were also envisaged to prevent the affluent strata from cornering the benefits of development (ChinnaVenkataSwamy., 2009). In general tribal communities possess unique cultures and thus variation in socioeconomic and cultural life is common from one tribal community to another tribe. They have distinct pattern of economy, technology, religious behavior and speak a large number of languages and dialects. In the light of this background, an attempt has been made in the present study to analyze the structure, conduct and performance of self help groups and their impact on socio economic development of Sugali tribal women in Chittoor district of Andhra Pradesh.

## METHODOLOGY

The present study is descriptive in nature. The study encompasses to evaluate the efficacy of SHGs on socio- economic development of Sugali tribal women in order to overcome inequality and to achieve their all-round development in the society through the SHGs. The data for the present study was collected randomly from a sample of 500 Sugali women aged >20 years from Chittoor district, Andhra Pradesh. The study protocol was duly approved by the Departmental Research and Development Committee of Department of Anthropology, Sri Venkateswara University, Tirupati. The objectives of the study were explained to all of the subjects before their consent is given.

Formal interviews were conducted with key informants and many other respondents to gather required information. Informal interviews were also conducted with the help of NGOs personnel and government officials. Detailed demographic information on socio- economic and empowering programmes were recorded in a standard structured and pretested questionnaire for gathering of information from sample SHGs and member respondents in the study area. The study was based on both primary and secondary data. Survey method has been adopted along with personal interview technique for the collection of primary data. Further, secondary data were pooled from the office records. The main tools for data collection include the traditional anthropological tools such as observation, focus group discussions, informal interviews, and house hold schedule for the collection of qualitative and quantitative data. Information on subject's demographics (age, education, occupation and income), housing structure, SHG group formation nature and its functioning, members savings, status of the women in SHG, utilization of the loan amount and confidence level of the women through SHG were

collected. The data collected was coded to do statistical analysis. Suitable statistical analysis was carried to draw inference.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the present study were concisely presented in the following tables. Demographics and socioeconomic status of the group members was shown in table 1. About 9 percent of the member's age falls below 25 years, 45 percent of the members age falls in between 26 to 35, 35 percent of the members age falls in the range of 36 to 45 and 11 percent of them were above 45 years. 85 percent of the women in the study were married, 11 percent unmarried, 2 percent each were widow or divorced/separated from their spouse. Nuclear family type was predominant to an extent of 71 percent. Illiteracy was noticed to an extent of 31 percent in the study sample. 55 percent attained primary education, 11 percent secondary education and 3 percent gained higher education. Regarding the type of ration card, 88 percent the members possess white card, 4 percent pink card, 7 percent anthyodaya/Annapurna card and 1 percent yet to procure any cards from the Government. Landless people were existing to an extent of 24 percent. A maximum of 62 percent holds the land less than 2.5 acres and 13 percent possess above 2.5 acres. 71 percent of the members gained colony houses constructed by the Government. 26 percent of the members possess RCC houses and only 3 percent were living in huts.

The nature of the SHG of Sugali tribal women were shown in table 2. The formation of SHG was initiated by Government agencies to an extent of 80 percent, followed by members itself for about 15 percent and 3 percent by NGOs and only one percent by scheduled banks. Eighty three percent of the groups consists members upto 17. Group consists of members in between 18 to 20 was 15 and above 20 members was seen to an extent of 2 percent only. In the study area 93 percent of the SHG members use to have group meeting monthly once. 4 percent of the people will have group meeting fortnight once, followed by weekly meetings in one percent of the SHG groups. On the otherhand occasional group meetings were recorded to an extent of 2 percent. Similarly income savings of the group members will be monthly for the 96 percent of the group members. Fifteen days once savings of finances were seen in 2 percent of the members, while weekly or 10 days once savings were recorded each one percent of the members. A maximum of 93 percent members use to save Rs. 50 per month. Savings upto 100 was seen among 3 percent of the members and remaining 3 percent use to save more than 100 rupees respectively. Almost 57 percent of the members gained experience in SHG for more than 6 years. 15 percent of them gained experience in between 5 to 6 years, 23 percent gained experience in between 3 to 4 years and 6 percent of them gained experience below 2 years. 72 percent of them are still surviving as member only. 14 percent were serving as representatives, 11 percent as animators and 3 percent as accountants. 92 percent of the members expressed that they joined in the group to promote the culture of savings among themselves. 4 percent each joined the group for getting loan and to gain social status.

Data on women's social status in the family after joining SHG was shown in table 3. Regarding the status of the women in the family after joining the SHG, 58 percent felt it is medium, and a maximum of 36 percent perceived that status in the family is high, and a low of 6 percent felt it is low. 47 percent of the women gained respectful treatment in the family, while 44 percent felt the gained respect is medium and 8.5 percent felt that no change. Regarding the education of their girl child, it was high to an extent of 39 percent, medium to an extent of 52 percent and low to an extent of 8 percent. Prevention of child labour is high for 39 percent, medium for 41 percent low for 20 percent. 33 percent of the women opined that the personal hygiene was high, 45 percent medium, and 22 low. Small family norm is high to an extent of 37 percent, medium to an extent of 46 percent and low to an extent of 18 percent. Women's involvement in the joint decisions on the purchase of household assets and investments was high to an extent of 44 percent, medium to an extent of 41 percent and low to an extent of 15 percent. Women's contribution towards meeting the family needs is high among 31 percent, medium among 52 percent and low among 16 percent of the women respectively. Participation in school function after joining SHG is high among 52 percent, medium among 43 percent and low 4 percent. Similarly

participation in the village/temple functions after joining SHG was high for 55 percent, medium for about 38 percent and low for about 7 percent. Participation in the co-members family functions was high to an extent of 35 percent, medium to an extent of 56 percent and low to an extent of 9 percent. Similarly celebration of festivals with neighbors was high to an extent of 38 percent, medium to an extent of 37 percent and low to an extent of 24 percent respectively.

Data on women's social status at work place after joining SHG was shown in table 4. Strength and unity among the coworkers is high to an extent of 54 percent, medium to an extent of 42 percent and low for about 4 percent. Usefulness of SHG training is high for about 54 percent, medium for about 39 percent and low for about 6 percent. Wage opportunities through SHG are high to extent of 27 percent, medium to an extent of 59 percent, and low for about 14 percent. Working with co-member of SHG is high for about 29 percent, medium for about 49 percent and low at 22 percent. Sharing of work burden among the coworkers is high to an extent of 27 percent, medium to an extent of 48 percent and low to an extent of 25 percent. Awareness/knowledge about the safety methods in work place is high for about 29 percent, medium for about 52 percent and low for about 19 percent respectively.

Data on women's individual development after joining SHG was shown in table 5. Level of literacy was high to an extent of 63 percent, medium to extent of 33 percent and low to an extent of 3 percent. Awareness on self reliance was high among 56 percent of the women, medium among 38 percent and low among 6 percent of the women. Improvement in communication skills was high among 33 percent, medium among 60 percent and low among 7 percent of the women. Women's opinion weightage in meeting/discussion was high to an extent of 35 percent, medium to an extent of 35 percent and low to an extent of 30 percent. Travel alone even at night was high among 35 percent, medium among 29 percent and low among 37 percent of the women. Women's perception to come out to help neighbor was high among 31 percent, medium among 46 percent and low among 23 percent of the women. Women's perception towards contacting bank and other institutions for her development was high among 45 percent of the women, medium among 38 percent of the women and low among 17 percent of the women respectively.

Data on women's status at raising voice against the injustice after joining the SHG was shown in table 6. Knowledge about the law to protect and defend women was high among 44 percent, medium among 51 percent and low among 4 percent of the women. Halting the young age marriages or forced marriages was high among 73 percent of the women, medium among 20 percent of the women and low among 6 percent of the women. Fighting against evils of dowry was high among 32 percent medium among 59 percent and low among 10 percent. Similarly fight against the evils of alcoholism was high among 34 percent, medium among 32 percent and low among 34 percent of the women. Gaining protection against the domestic violence was high 41 percent, medium among 27 percent and low among 32 percent of the women. Gaining knowledge about gender equality and equal rights of ancestral property was high among 44 percent and medium among 33 percent and low among 23 percent of the women respectively.

The importance of SHGs in overcoming exploitation, building confidence towards economic self reliance in both rural and tribal women who are away from social structure is appreciated. Thus these groups can assemble under an umbrella with a common objective to counter the exploitation. Socioeconomic development and empowerment of women is a vital area for overall development of the family, society and as well the country. This could be possible with an improved system of education, employment opportunities, lifestyles, income, skill development and cultural factors. The major barriers for women socioeconomic development and empowerment are poverty, illiteracy and unemployment.

Education helps in the overall development of women in the society. Education helps women to break the social barriers, traditional orthodox rules. It changes their life and gives them mental power to overcome the challenges emerging in today's world. Education is important because it is a milestone of women empowerment which helps to reduce inequalities and improve the status of woman in family and society (Baisakhi Bhattacharjee, 2015). In the present study almost 31 percent of the tribal women were illiterates and 55 percent were with primary education. The results were comparable with other



tribal populations of India. Improving the literacy rate will be very much useful in overall development of the women.

Self-help Group Institution (SHGI) allows all of its members regularly meet on a fixed time and date in a month to collect savings from members under the supervision of SHGI/NGOs. Thus SHG's will inculcate the habit of thrift and credit among the members, who generally belong to the families of BPL. In the present study Governmental agencies have played a predominant role in the formation of the SHG. It is worthy to note that a majority of the Sugali women (92%) claimed to inculcate the habit small savings norms, which is termed as positive attitude towards empowerment. Further its regular meetings allow the members to gain communication skills and confidence on various tasks different spheres of life. Research studies highlight that women upon gaining social status can effectively inculcate the culture self sustaining in the society (Pradeep and Rakshitha Rai, 2019)

Empowerment of women includes both control over physical, human, intellectual and financial resources as well as over ideology i.e. belief, values and attitudes. It strengthens one's innate ability by way of acquiring knowledge, power and experience. Empowering women puts the spotlight on education and employment which are an essential element for sustainable development (Nikita Khoisnam., 2015). Even though the Sugali women have not succeeded in total autonomy in elevating her social status through several indicators, but an appreciable percentage of the women for nearly 40 percent in the current study gained respect both at work place and in house, able to educate her children, maintaining personal hygiene and above all joint decisions in the family. Similar studies were published in the elsewhere population groups (Rachit Gupta and Shalini Agarwal, 2017; Vezhaventhan and Ameen Nisha, 2018).

In the present study women gained protect against the domestic violence appreciably. Promisingly women free from the evils of dowry and alcoholism thus gained knowledge and independency to protect herself. India's National Family Health Survey-III, carried out in 29 states during 2005-06, has found that a substantial proportion of married women have been physically or sexually abused by their husbands at some time in their lives. After the implementation of the act wide range of cases were filed across the states of India and judgments delivered under Protection of Women against Domestic Violence Act 2005 by the family courts, civil courts and in few by the supreme courts (Sunil S Kadam and Vinod A Chaudhari, 2011).

The Self Help Groups have proved the way for social and economic independence of women from rural and tribal segments. In conclusion, SHGs plays predominant role in elevating the women social status. Self help Groups have been playing considerable role in training of Swarozgaris, infrastructure development, marketing and technology support, communication level of members, self confidence among sample members, change in family violence, frequency of interaction with outsiders, change in the saving pattern of SHG members, change in the cumulative saving pattern of SHG members per month, involvement in politics, achieving social harmony, achieving social justice, involvement in community action, sustainable quality and accountability (Kanakalatha, 2017).

## CONCLUSION

SHGs allows women to acquire power for their self-supportive life. Empowering women is not just for meeting their economic needs but also more holistic social development. SHGs have provided them the opportunity to open a bank account, save and invest money. This has helped to raise their income and thus alleviate poverty to a large extent. To enrich it with all the aspects like employment, entrepreneurship and education alongside the added social, political and economic empowerment. SHGs is a way to raise the income level and improve the living standards and economic independence of the rural women. SHG movement among the rural poor in different parts of the country is emerging as a very reliable and efficient mode for technology transfer. It proved to be successful in addressing the interests of women in a sustained manner.

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**Table 1. Demographics and socioeconomic status of the group members**

	N	%
<b>Age</b>		
Up to 25	46	9.2
26 to 35	224	44.8
36 to 45	174	34.8
Above 45	56	11.2
<b>Marital status</b>		
Married	425	85.0
Unmarried	55	11.0
Widow	10	2.0
Divorced/Separated	10	2.0
<b>Nature of the family</b>		
Joint	147	29.4
Nuclear	353	70.6
<b>Education status</b>		
Illiterate	154	30.8
Primary	273	54.6
Secondary	57	11.4
Higher	16	3.2
<b>Type of Ration Card</b>		
White Card	439	87.8
Pink Card	21	4.2
Antyodaya/ Annapurna	34	6.8
No Card	6	1.2
<b>Land holdings</b>		
Landless	122	24.4
Less than 2.5 Acres	311	62.2
>2.51	67	13.4
<b>Nature of the house occupied</b>		
Hut	16	3.2
Colony	354	70.8
RCC	130	26.0

**Table 2. Self help group formation and performance of the members**

	N	%
<b>Formation of the SHG</b>		
By its Members	75	15.0
By bank	7	1.4
By NGO	17	3.4
By Government Agency	401	80.2
<b>Size of the group</b>		
Up to 17 Members	415	83.0
18 to 20 Members	76	15.2

Above 20 Members	9	1.8
<b>Meeting</b>		
Weekly	5	1.0
15 days once	18	3.6
Monthly	466	93.2
Occasionally	11	2.2
<b>Frequency of the savings</b>		
Weekly	5	1.0
10 days once	6	1.2
15 days once	11	2.2
Monthly	478	95.6
<b>Amount of savings (per Meeting)</b>		
Rs.50	467	93.4
Rs. 76 to 100	16	3.2
Above Rs 100	17	3.4
<b>Years of membership experience in SHG</b>		
Up to 2 Years	30	6.0
3 to 4 Years	113	22.6
5 to 6 Years	74	14.8
Above 6 Years	283	56.6
<b>Position in SHG</b>		
Animator	54	10.8
Representative	70	14.0
Accountant	14	2.8
Member	362	72.4
<b>Reasons for joining in SHG</b>		
For getting loan	18	3.6
For promoting savings habit	461	92.2
For social status	21	4.2

Table 3. Women social status in the family after joining SHG

	High		Medium		Low	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Increases the status of women	179	35.8	289	57.8	32	6.4
Respectful treatment among the family members	236	47.2	221	44.2	43	8.6
Education of girl children	195	39.0	261	52.2	44	8.8
Prevent the child Labour	191	38.2	203	40.6	106	21.2
Personal hygiene	168	33.6	224	44.8	108	21.6
Small family	184	36.8	228	45.6	88	17.6
Joint decisions on purchase of household assets and investments	221	44.2	204	40.8	75	15.0
Contribution towards meeting the family needs	157	31.4	261	52.2	82	16.4
Participation in the school functions	262	52.4	216	43.2	22	4.4
Participation in the village/temple functions	273	54.6	192	38.4	35	7.0

Participation in the family function of co-members	178	35.6	278	55.6	44	8.8
Celebration of festival with neighbour	192	38.4	186	37.2	122	24.4

**Table 4. Women social status at the work place after joining SHG**

	High		Medium		Low	
	N	%	N	N	%	%
Strength and unity among the co-workers	271	54.2	209	41.8	20	4.0
Usefulness of SHGs training	272	54.4	196	39.2	32	6.4
Work/Wage opportunities through SHGs	135	27.0	293	58.6	72	14.4
Working with co-member of SHGs	146	29.2	244	48.8	110	22.0
Sharing of work burden among co-workers	136	27.2	240	48.0	124	24.8
Awareness /Knowledge about the safety methods in work place	146	29.2	258	51.6	96	19.2

**Table 5. Women social status towards individual development after joining SHG**

	High		Medium		Low	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Level of literacy	316	63.2	167	33.4	17	3.4
Awareness of self reliance	282	56.4	189	37.8	29	5.8
Improvement in communication skill	164	32.8	299	59.8	37	7.4
Opinion in a meeting/discussion	175	35.0	174	34.8	151	30.2
Travel alone even at night	173	34.6	144	28.8	183	36.6
Comes out to help neighbour	157	31.4	228	45.6	115	23.0
Contact with bank and other institution for your development	227	45.4	190	38.0	83	16.6

**Table 6. Women status at raising voice against injustice after joining SHG**

	High		Medium		Low	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Knowledge about the law to protect and defend women	222	44.4	257	51.4	21	4.2
Stop the young age and forced marriage	367	73.4	102	20.4	31	6.2
Evils of dowry	159	31.8	293	58.6	48	9.6
Evils of alcoholism	171	34.2	160	32.0	169	33.8
Protect wife beating by husbands	207	41.4	135	27.0	158	31.6
Knowledge about gender equality and equal rights of ancestor property	219	43.8	166	33.2	115	23.0

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