INTRODUCTION
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Women constitute nearly half the population of a country. Being half of the population women have a great potential to contribute to the welfare and development of the society. Talking about the crucial role of women in development Kofi Annan (2003) has this to say:

*Study after study has shown that there is no effective development strategy in which women do not play a central role. When women are fully involved, the benefits can be seen immediately: families are healthier and better fed; their income, savings and reinvestment go up. And what is true of families is also true of communities and, in the long run, of whole countries.... When women thrive, all of society benefits, and succeeding generations are given a better start in life.*

This view is endorsed by Krishnamurthi (2003) when he says that women have the most formative role in shaping the future of mankind. The result of neglecting the role of women in development has been brought out by Feldman (1967). He says: “It has long since been proved that any nation which fails to utilize its women power to the best advantage simply divests itself of half of its human assets, in both physical and intellectual terms”. The bottom line is that there cannot be true social progress without ensuring the empowerment of women (Shekhawat, 2003). However, women’s potential can be realized only in a condition where the women are enabled or in other words empowered to contribute as well as men. Though laws and programmes have been initiated towards empowering them, in reality women are not given their due place and opportunities for development, especially in
developing countries. There exists in society a biased view against equality for women and the consequent inferior treatment of women. Women are discriminated against from womb to tomb.

Present Status of Women

Women’s status has been defined variedly. Mukerjee (1975) views status as a woman’s authority or power within the family / community and the prestige commanded from other members. The United Nations Organization has defined status as the extent to which women have access to knowledge, economic resources and political power as well as the degree of autonomy they have in decision-making and making personal choices at crucial points in their life-cycle (Krishnaraj, 1986).

As to the status of Indian women, it has been different in different periods of known history. During the Vedic and Rigvedic period (approximately between 4000 & 1000 BC), women in India held equal status with that of men (Kuppuswamy, 1975; Choudhury, 1978). The degradation of women started only since 300 BC. The patriarchal joint family system, the structure of property ownership, early marriage, self-immolation of widows (sati) or state of permanent widowhood were all the characteristics of this degradation (Desai, quoted in Kuppuswamy, 1975:243). This state continued till Independence. Since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries several reformers, including Gandhiji, the Father of the Nation, fought against those aspects of the system which oppressed females. Their relentless crusade culminated in independent India including women’s right to equality in its Constitution.
The Indian Constitution provides women equal rights with men, equality before the law, equality of opportunity for education and employment. These rights are guaranteed as fundamental rights (Khan, 2001). Later, in independent India many laws were enacted to protect the rights and privileges of women. In spite of all these, a large number of women in India even today continue to remain citizens not assured of human rights and dignity. They are struggling to get integrated into the national mainstream as equal partners in progress and development (Venkataraman, Lakshmanan and Narayanaswamy, 1982).

The poor social status of women in India is reflected in the violence that is unleashed against them. Violence against women means any act of gender-based violence which results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering (Government of India, 1995). Every day, women are battered, sexually harassed, abused, raped and psychologically tortured in the home, the workplace and society (Rao and Pushpalatha, 1998). Domestic violence is a form of violence to which thousands of women are exposed. Women are abused at home by husbands, fathers, brothers and uncles. The reason for such a sad state of affairs is the subordinate status—educationally, economically, politically and socially—of women.

Education is admittedly the key factor in the overall progress of a state or a country. After fifty-seven years of independence, only 54.28 per cent women are literate. The dropout rate of girls at the primary stage is higher than that of boys. There is a gap between boys and girls in their participation in education.
Women’s health status is none the better. It is estimated, that pregnancy-related deaths account for one quarter of all fatalities among women aged 15 to 29, with well over two-thirds of them considered preventable. For every maternal death in India, as estimated 20 more women suffer from impaired health. One village level study of rural women in Maharashtra on the basis of physical examinations determined that some 92 percent suffered from one or more gynecological disorder (Coonrod, 1998). Further, it is estimated that 15 per cent of deaths among women in the reproductive age group (15-44 years) are maternal deaths due to bleeding and anaemia. Severe anaemia is one of the important reasons for abortions, premature births and low birth weight of babies (Government of India, 1995). The rate of decline of maternal mortality has been very slow in India. Added to these, of late women in large numbers become victims of HIV / AIDS. It is currently estimated that there may be 1 to 2 million HIV infected persons in India, of whom at least one-third are women.

According to the Census data (1991), the work participation rate (i.e. the proportion of employed or total workers to population) of females steadily rose from 14.22 percent in 1971 to 19.67 in 1981 and to 22.27 in 1991. The rise in work participation of rural females has been even steeper from 15.92 in 1971 to 26.79 in 1991. The rise in work participation of urban females over the two decades is somewhat less impressive. Out of the 22.27 per cent female work participation in 1991, main workers contributed 16.03 per cent and marginal workers 6.24 per cent. It is significant to point out that women constituted 90 per cent of the total marginal workers. Women’s employment in the organized sector has revealed significant increase from 1.9 million in
1971 to 4.0 million in 1993, constituting 14.6 per cent of the total employment of 27.18 million. Of these 2.47 million women, i.e., about 62 per cent are employed in the public sector and 1.6 million i.e. 38 per cent in the private sector. As compared to women in the organized sector, the representation of men is almost six times more. A matter of great concern is the unemployment rates for female workers in recent years. The rate of unemployment is more significant for urban females at 4.7 per cent compared to 0.3 per cent for rural females.

All over the world women represent fifty per cent of the world's population, and one-third of the official labour force, they perform nearly two-third of all working hours, receive only one-tenth of the world income and own less than one per cent of the world property (Quoted by Maitrayee and Shackles, 1985).

Needless to say there is an urgent need to improve the social, economic and health status of Indian women. No doubt these can be achieved by empowering women in all these areas. All efforts should be taken to rectify this anomaly and to establish mechanisms to empower women (Sorabjee, 2003).

Empowerment of Women

According to Pillai (1995) “Empowerment is an active, multi-dimensional process which enables women to realize their full identity and powers in all spheres of life”. It is held that mere economic development of women cannot bring them on par with men. The need of the day is multi-dimensional empowerment of women including social (welfare), economic
access to opportunities and resources), psychological (conscientization that gender inequality is not god-given and can be altered) and political (participation in and control over the decision-making process). Though all over the world much has been done for the empowerment of women there is a long way to go (Rao and Dutt, 2003). Educating women is the panacea for remedying the illnesses of the present situation.

Importance of Education

Education is considered a key instrument for all social changes. The Education Commission's report rightly observed, "The destiny of India is being shaped in her classroom" (Khan, 2001). Talking about the empowerment of women, Sadik (Rao and Dutt, 2003) said that “education is empowerment and women must be empowered to take control of their own lives”, and that “education opens the door to opportunity and choice for women. It is the key to overcoming oppressive customs and traditions that have relegated girls and women to the status of ‘second class citizens’ in their families and in their societies”. It is said that in educating a boy one educates an individual, but in educating a girl one educates a family, society and ultimately the nation. When women are educated, there is significant improvement in their status within the family and in society (Ramachandran, 2002).

In the personal sphere, education liberates women from ignorance and enhances their self-worth, confidence and sense of capacity. Education of women is also related to reducing fertility levels and infant mortality and in promoting the overall well-being of the family because of their ability for communication with their spouses. It enables them to choose their own way
and look after their families in a better way. It also enables them to become aware of their rights, privileges and responsibilities. In the public sphere, it increases their income-earning potential and contributes to overall national development. The society and community also benefit from the higher productivity of women (Rao and Dutt, 2003; Rajendran, 2003).

Education plays a pivotal role, in any intervention to increase women's participation in development. Over the last decade, efforts have been taken to reach out to women, understand their needs, and integrate them into the development process (Rao and Dutt, 2003). For women to work as fellow and equal human beings capable of playing many roles shared and interchangeable with those of men, women must be educated and allowed to participate in all activities (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 1975).

It has been found that female literacy is negatively related to fertility rates, population growth rates and infant and child mortality rates. Education is found to be positively related to female age at marriage, life expectancy participation in modern sectors of the economy and female enrolment (Nayar, 2002). Education brightens the chances for access to employment, which, in turn, enhances economic empowerment of women and it is also the most dynamic factor of development. It makes the individuals conscientious, which helps them to perceive, interpret, criticise and finally transform their environment.
The above discussion brings to light the importance of education for women in empowering them, betterment of society and development of the nation. Unless women are empowered to play an effective role in the social, political and economic life of the country, the very development of the country will be adversely affected. The one instrument that is sure to bring up the status of women and enable them to contribute to self, society and national development is education, especially under the condition where non enrollment and dropout rate are higher for girl children than boys.

For education to play this vital role, it should not only be formal, but also be nonformal and lifelong.

**importance of Lifelong Learning**

Lifelong learning is continuous learning throughout one's life. It may be defined as all learning activities undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence, within a personal, civic, social and / or employment related perspective (Annette and Sparrow, 1985; Sharma and Khandai, 2001).

It is the process of helping individuals to sustain and enrich their knowledge and skills. Science and technology are ever expanding and knowledge explosion is taking place everywhere. Information Technology revolution is yet another phenomenon demanding continuing education. No one can boast of knowing everything. As such, continuing education is needed for all and for ever (Pillai, 2001).
India is facing problems of population, poverty, illiteracy, corruption and criminalization and communalization of politics. In order to solve these problems, we need a mobilized and participatory society. This can be possible only through an effective programme of continuous learning. People’s basic learning is to be reinforced and their skills and knowledge are to be updated for them to be effective citizens, in the case of men as well as women.

Statement of the Problem

Lifelong education is imperative for women to improve their downtrodden status. Research studies have shown that a woman must have education at least beyond primary schooling (Prabhakaran, 2002). Education upto the university or tertiary level is often the key to enter into the high echelons of professional life. While basic education is essential for girls and young women, older women and those who have grown so old that they cannot attend formal education can acquire their education through continuing and lifelong education means. As for the kind of lifelong education, women today do not need just a basic education, but skill-oriented functional education that will equip them to take up challenging jobs, help them enjoy economic independence and deliver them from undue domination by others (Prabhakaran, 2002).

Realizing the importance of continuing education and lifelong learning, many agencies, governmental and nongovernmental, and private individuals offer a number of formal and nonformal education programmes. However, no adequate information is available as to whether these courses are need
driven, how much of the need is satisfied and whether women are benefited at all. To answer these and other questions, the present investigation titled "Lifelong Learning Aspirations and their Correlates of Rural Women in Dindigul District" was taken up.

Tamil Nadu, one among the 28 States of India, has 29 districts. Dindigul District is one of the districts in Tamil Nadu. It is one of the backward districts in Tamil Nadu. The purpose of the study was to investigate women’s aspirations regarding continuing their education. The study has also tried to describe the various factors related to their desire to continue their studies. More specifically, it has tried to answer the following questions:

1. Which subject / courses did women prefer to learn?

2. What is the relationship between socio-economic variables like age, educational level and occupational status, family income, community, marital status, type of family, number of children, youngest child’s age, husband’s educational status and the lifelong learning aspirations of women?

3. What are the reasons for continuing their education?

4. Which mode of education, whether open or formal, do the women prefer to continue their courses or education?

5. What are the barriers for continuing their education?

6. What are the learning facilities available in their places for continuing their education?
Significance of the Study

The present study titled “Lifelong Learning Aspirations and their Correlates of Rural Women in Dindigul District” was conceived as important from the point of view of individuals, educational planners, policy makers and others to offer relevant educational courses or vocational training courses to fulfill women’s aspirations, which will uplift their condition.

The present study is significant in many respects. The prime significance is that there has been no study related to the continuing education status of the population of Tamil Nadu. As such no holistic information is available regarding the nature and extent of continuing education in the State of Tamil Nadu where the study has been conducted. Of course distance education departments of universities and the National Open University and nonformal education agencies have been conducting courses. But whether these courses are demand driven or need based has not been scientifically studied. As the present study attempts to find out the lifelong learning aspirations of women, the findings will enable educationists to assess whether the courses offered are in keeping with the aspirations of the stakeholders.

Secondly, no one has attempted to study the lifelong learning aspirations of women. In the changing social context, wherein more and more women are getting educated and more women are entering employment and illiterates and neoliterates and low level educated women exist simultaneously, it is hard to decide which courses are to be offered without assessing the need for various courses. The outcomes of the present study will give an idea about the courses in demand.
Thirdly, the findings of the study will greatly benefit the literacy mission personnel. The efforts to provide basic education have crossed two stages, i.e., Total Literacy and Post Literacy stages. The whole country is in the Continuing Education phase. This phase will continue forever. Since continuing education efforts have just started for literates and neoliterates, for the complete realization of its objectives, there should be a solid base. The Continuing Education Programme of the Government of Tamil Nadu has only recently taken off. Conducting a survey of learning aspirations of women will contribute to effective, fruitful and need driven educational programmes. It is hoped that the findings of the study will provide a solid base for this. The Continuing Education efforts of the government for women will be more meaningful and effective if some kind of need assessment is done not only of courses but also of the mode of education and the reasons for choosing the courses. The findings of the present study will be very helpful in this regard.

Continuing education efforts both in the formal and nonformal sectors will be strengthened by the findings of the present study because the lifelong learning aspirations of both illiterates and the educated have been studied. Now, various voluntary organizations, individuals and university departments are sponsoring vocational and nonvocational courses for fulfilling the continuing education aspirations of individuals. Sponsoring any education or training programme without knowing the needs or interest of the people will not obtain optimum results. This is all the more important under the present socio-economic conditions in our country, especially those relating to women. Women’s conditions have to be improved in the social and economic aspects. Education is the key in this improvement. Many women dropout from school
at various stages for various reasons. They might all have aspirations to learn about various subjects either through formal or informal means. Studying their learning aspirations will enable educationists to offer meaningful and effective formal and nonformal courses. No such baseline studies have been conducted so far. The present study will be very useful in this respect. The study will also be very helpful to the continuing education learners to know about continuing education opportunities and courses to choose from.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were:

1. to identify the lifelong learning aspirations of selected women;

2. to identify the influence of variables, namely, age, educational and occupational status, family income, community, marital status, type of family, number of children, youngest child's age and husband's educational status on the lifelong learning aspirations of women; and,

3. to find out the facilities available for fulfilling the lifelong learning aspirations of rural women.

Hypotheses Tested

The following hypotheses were tested in this study:

1. Lifelong learning aspirations differ among women from different age groups.

2. There is a positive relationship between the educational level of women and their lifelong learning aspirations.
3. Working women have more aspiration for continuing their education than non-working women.

4. Among women, there is a direct relationship between lifelong learning aspirations and family income.

5. Lifelong learning aspirations differ among women from different communities.

6. Unmarried women have more aspiration for continuing their education than married women.

7. Women who are from nuclear, extended and joint families differ in their lifelong learning aspirations.

8. There is a relationship between women’s lifelong learning aspirations and the number of their children.

9. There is a direct relationship between the lifelong learning aspirations of women and their youngest child’s age.

10. There is a relationship between women’s lifelong learning aspirations and their husband’s educational status.

**Conceptual and Operational Definitions**

The important terms in the present study are defined both conceptually and operationally as follows:

Lifelong learning, in the present study, means any learning activity undertaken throughout one’s life, particularly for acquiring knowledge, skill and competence with the aim of improving one’s quality of life.
Lifelong learning aspiration is operationally defined as preferences stated by women between 15 and 40 years of age in terms of knowledge, skill and competence development courses for improving their quality of life.

Lifelong learning aspirations in the present study have been defined multi dimensionally. The aspirations were assessed in terms of whether the respondents wanted to continue their studies, reasons for continuing their studies and the subjects / courses / aspects they wanted to learn and the factors influencing their desire to continue their studies. Socio-economic variables namely, age, educational and occupational status, family income, community, marital status, type of family, number of children, youngest child's age and the husband's educational status were included as variables influencing the respondents' lifelong learning aspirations.

Delimitation of the Study

The present study focused on only women from sixteen Panchayats out of 304 Panchayats of Dindigul District and on the age group ranging from 15 to 40 years. The study would have been enriched by including subjects of all the age groups from all areas like semi urban, urban and hill areas of whole of Dindigul District. Inclusion of these would have provided knowledge in depth on the educational aspirations of the women of Dindigul District. However, owing to constraints of time, the researcher limited her study to selected rural women of 15 to 40 years of age.