CHAPTER V
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

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Despite many international agreements affirming women's rights, women are much more likely than men to be poor, malnourished and illiterate and to have less access than men to medical care, property ownership, credit, training and employment. Equity, development and peace would be achieved only through women's empowerment and full, equal participation in all spheres of society. Involvement of women in SHG activities is expected to improve women's autonomy to take independent decisions including their fertility. Hence, a comparative study of women's autonomy and their fertility behaviour among the members and non-members of SHG had been undertaken on a sample of 600 members and 600 non-members of SHGs selected from three different districts of Tamil Nadu.

Women's autonomy measured in terms of their ability to take independent decision in all spheres of their life within and outside home play an important role in influencing their fertility behaviour, such as age at first birth, birth interval, age at last birth, number and sex composition of children. In this context, the present study aimed to assess the level of women's autonomy and its effect on their fertility behaviour both among the members and non-members of SHG. The target was married women aged 15-29 years and having at least one living child at the time of interview. This group was chosen given the fact that most of the current child bearing occurred within this age group.

The study was carried out in three districts of Tamil Nadu viz., Kancheepuram, Thiruchirapalli and Villupuram representing high, medium and low level of gender development as reported in the Tamil Nadu Gender Development Report, 2001. In each district, a sample of 200 women from members and 200 women from non-members were selected using multi-stage random sampling procedure. Thus the total sample consisted of 600 women from members and 600 women from non-members. The selected women were interviewed in their place of residence using an interview schedule. The information collected from the women covered a range of subjects which included socio-economic,
demographic and marital characteristics of the respondents, their fertility behaviour, family planning knowledge and adoption and eight different dimensions of women's autonomy variables. The data collection work was carried out during the period from May to October 2005.

Both univariate and multivariate analysis were carried out in the study to assess the level of women's autonomy and its socio-economic, demographic determinants both among the members and non-members. The fertility behaviour of women was also assessed based on the number of children ever born, age at first birth, age at last birth, birth interval and sex composition of children. The effect of women's autonomy on their fertility behaviour and family planning knowledge and use was also assessed in this study.

The level of autonomy of women was assessed in this study based on the following eight specific measures with each of them having a set of measurement indicators: 1. Sex-segregated interaction; 2. Freedom of movement; 3. Freedom to participate in social and political activities; 4. Financial management; 5. Household decisions; 6. Freedom of choice; 7. Violence against women; and 8. Decision about contraception and fertility.

5.1 Women's autonomy

The major findings of the analysis of data on the level of women's autonomy on each of the eight different measures by selected socio-economic, demographic and marital characteristics of the respondents and also based on their level of exposure to various mass media are discussed in this section.

5.2 Sex-segregated interaction

The total expected autonomy score on sex-segregated interaction was 16. The mean autonomy score attained by women was 12.66 among the members (79.13 per cent) and 11.77 (73.56 per cent) among the non-members. The mean autonomy score on sex-segregated interaction was more among the members than non-members. (Education of women was observed to have significantly positive effect on women's autonomy on sex-segregated interaction and
education of husband was significant only among the non-members. (Standard of living had significantly positive effect on women's autonomy both among the members and non-members.)

Among the demographic variables examined in this study, (total number of children is the only variable having significant effect on women's autonomy on sex-segregated interaction among the members. Among the non-members, women's autonomy on sex-segregated interaction significantly increased with the age of women and age at marriage) (Number of female children was showing significant difference in the mean autonomy score among the non-members. (Women who had two or more female children were having significantly low autonomy than the others!) None of the marital characteristic variables seemed to have any significant influence on the autonomy of women on sex-segregated interaction. (Women's exposure to mass media, watching TV and reading newspapers / magazines were observed to have significantly positive effect on women's autonomy on sex-segregated interaction both among the members and non-members.) Listening to radio and going to movies showed significant difference only among the non-members.

5.3 Freedom of movement

The total expected autonomy score on freedom of movement was 26. The mean autonomy score attained by women in rural and urban areas was 15.90 (61.15 per cent) and 12.23 (47.04 per cent) respectively! The examination of the influence of the socio-economic variables on women's autonomy on freedom of movement revealed that among the members, women who had education up to higher secondary and above were having significantly higher autonomy on freedom of movement than others, Muslim women had significantly lower autonomy on freedom of movement than others. (Women who had involved in income earning economic activities and women who had contributed more than 25 per cent to total family income were having significantly higher autonomy on freedom of movement than the others.)
Among the non-members, women's autonomy on freedom of movement increased with education of women. Muslim women and women from high standard of living families were having significantly low level of autonomy on freedom of movement compared to others. (Women involved in income earning economic activities, women who had contributed more than 25 per cent to total family income and women in nuclear families were observed to have significantly higher autonomy on freedom of movement than others.

Age of women and marital duration were the demographic variables having significant influence on women's autonomy on freedom of movement both among the members and non-members. Age of women was observed to have significantly positive effect on women's autonomy. Women who had married at ages 21 or more were having significantly low autonomy than women who had married at ages 20 or less among the members. Number of male children had significantly positive effect on women's autonomy on freedom of movement among the members. Among the non-members, women who had two or more female children showed higher autonomy and those who had no female child had significantly low autonomy than those who had two or more number of female children and one female child.

None of the marital characteristic variables was observed to have any significant effect on women's autonomy on freedom of movement both among the members and non-members. Reading newspapers/magazines was having significantly positive effect on freedom of movement both among the members and non-members. Watching television was showing significant influence only among the members. Going to movies was having significantly positive effect on freedom of movement only among the non-members.

5.4 Participation in social and political activities

The expected total autonomy score on freedom to participate in social and political activities was 14. (It is observed that the total mean score attained by women both among the members and non-members was very low at 6.43 (45.93 per cent) and 2.06 (14.71 per cent) respectively. (Education of women,
Involvement of women, in income earning economic activities and contribution of women to total family income had significantly positive effect on freedom of participation both among the members and non-members. (Muslim women were having significantly low autonomy on freedom of participation among the non-members.)

(Age of women and marital duration were the demographic variables observed to have significant effect on freedom of participation among the members.)

Consanguineous type and kind of marriage variables were observed to have significant effect on freedom of participation among the non-members. (Watching television and reading newspapers / magazines were having significantly positive effect on women's autonomy on freedom of participation in social and political activities both among the members and non-members.)

5.5 Financial management

The total expected score on financial management was 6. (The mean score attained by women was 3.51 (58.50 per cent) among the members and 2.63 (43.83 per cent) among the non-members. Involvement of women in income earning economic activities, percent contribution to total family income and type of family were having significant effect on autonomy of women on financial management both among the members and non-members.) Education of husband had significantly negative effect on financial management. (Women in nuclear families had significantly higher autonomy on financial management than women in joint families both among the members and non-members. Muslim women had significantly lower autonomy than others among the non-members.)

(Age of women and marital duration were the demographic variables having significantly positive effect on women's autonomy on financial management both among the members and non-members.) Age at marriage was observed to have significant effect only among the members. Among the members, women who had more than two female children have significantly higher autonomy than others. Women who had love marriage were having significantly higher autonomy
on financial management among the members and the non-members, women who had Inter-caste / inter-religious marriage, were having significantly higher autonomy on financial management than others. Women going to movies (at least once a month) among the members were having significantly higher autonomy on financial managements.

5.6 Household decisions

The total expected score on women's autonomy on household decisions was 22. (The mean score attained by women was 12.80 (58.15 per cent) among the members and 10.31 (46.86 per cent) among the non-members. Among the non-members, education of husband, religion, community, involvement in income earning economic activities, percent contribution to total family income and type of family were having significant influence on women's autonomy on household decisions.) Education of husband negatively associated with women's autonomy on household decisions. (Christian women, SC/ST women, women involved in income earning economic activities, women who contributed more to total family income and women in nuclear family system were having significantly higher autonomy on household decisions than others among the members.) (Among the non-members, women involved in income earning activities, women contributing 25 per cent income and type of family had significant influence on women's autonomy on household decisions.) (It is observed that women in nuclear family had significantly higher autonomy than women in joint family.)! Age of women, marital duration, number of female children and total number of children were the demographic variables having significantly positive influence on women's autonomy on household decisions among the members. (Among the non-members, age of women, marital duration, number of female children and total number of children were having significant influence on women's autonomy on household decisions. Women who had love marriage and women who had inter-caste / inter-religious marriage were having significantly higher autonomy on household decisions than others both among the members and non-members.) (Reading newspapers / magazines were having positive effect on household decisions among the non-members.)
5.7 Freedom of choice

The total expected autonomy score on women's autonomy on freedom of choice was 16. (interestingly, the mean score attained by women was very high at 14.83 (92.69 per cent) among the members and 14.43 (90.19 per cent) among the non-members) (Religion was the only socio-economic variable having significant association with women's autonomy on freedom of choice among the non-members) It is observed that Muslim women were having significantly lower autonomy on freedom of choice than Hindu and Christian women (Among the members, education of women, religion and community were having significant association with women's autonomy on freedom of choice. Education of women having significantly positive effect on women's autonomy on freedom of choice. Muslim women were having significantly lower autonomy than Hindu and Christian women.

(Total number of children was the only demographic variable having significant influence on women's autonomy on freedom of choice among the members.) (Among the non-members, age of women was having significant influence on women's autonomy on freedom of choice. None of the marital characteristic variables were having significant influence on women's autonomy on freedom of choice both among the members and non-members.

Watching television and reading newspapers / magazines were having significantly positive effect on women's autonomy on freedom of choice among the members) (Listening to radio and watching television were having significantly positive effect among the non-members.)

5.8 Violence against women

The total expected autonomy score on violence against women was 20. (The mean score attained by women was 17.13 (85.65 per cent) among the members and 17.08 (85.40 per cent) among the non-members) Community, standard of living and percentage contribution to total income were having significant association
with women's autonomy on violence against women both among the members and non-members. Education of respondent, education of husband, religion, involvement in income earning activities and type of family were having significant association with women's autonomy on violence against women among the non-members."

Education of women, education of husband, standard of living were having significantly positive influence on women's autonomy among the non-members, (standard of living was the only variable having significant influence among the members.) Lower caste women were having low autonomy on violence against women than others both among the members and non-members. Surprisingly, working women and women contributing more than 25 per cent to total family income and women living in nuclear family were having significantly lower autonomy on violence against women than others among the non-members.* Among the members, women contributing more than 25 per cent to total family income were having lower autonomy than others.

Martial duration and number of female children were the demographic variables having significantly positive effect on women's autonomy on violence against women among the members. (Among the non-members, only marital duration variable was having significant effect on women's autonomy on violence against women!) Marital duration was having significantly negative effect on women's autonomy on violence against women.

(Who had arranged marriage had significantly higher autonomy among the members.) Women who had consanguineous marriage and same caste marriage had significantly more autonomy on violence against women among the non-members) (listening to radio, watching television, going to movies and reading newspaper magazines were having significantly positive effect on women's autonomy on violence against women among the non-members)
5.9 Decision about contraception and fertility

The expected total autonomy score on women's autonomy on taking decision about contraception and fertility was 8. (The mean autonomy score attained by women was 4.34 (54.25 per cent) among the members and 4.10 (51.25 per cent) among the non-members.)

(Education of women, education of husband, involvement in income earning economic activities and contribution to total family income were having significant effect on women's autonomy on decision about contraception and fertility both among the members and non-members.) Education of husband and standard of living had significantly negative effect on women's autonomy among the members. Also women involved in income earning economic activities and women contributing more to total family income were having significantly more autonomy than others. Lower caste women were having significantly more autonomy than others.)

Husband-wife age difference was the only demographic variable having significantly positive influence on women's autonomy among the members. More than nine years of marital duration was having significantly higher autonomy on decision about contraception and fertility. None of the marital characteristic variables was having any significant influence on women's autonomy on decision about contraception and fertility except type of marriage among the non-members. Among the members, women who had maternal side marriage, women who had love marriage and inter caste / religious marriage were having significantly higher autonomy than others.

5.1.0 Total autonomy

The overall total expected autonomy score combining all the eight measures of women's autonomy was 128. (It is observed that the total mean score attained by women was 87.55 (68.40 per cent) among the members and 74.56 (58.25 per cent) among the non-members)
Among the members, education of women, religion, standard of living, involvement in economic activities, contribution to total family income and type of family were having significant influence on women's autonomy. Education of women was having positive effect on women's autonomy both among the members and non-members. Involvement in economic activities and more contribution to total family income were having significantly positive effect on women's autonomy. Women living in nuclear family system were having significantly high autonomy than women living in joint family system among the members.

Among the non-members, education of women, religion, economic activities, contribution to total income and type of family were having significant effect on women's autonomy. It is observed that education of women was having significantly positive effect on women's autonomy. Muslim women, women who had low standard of living and women living in joint family system were having significantly low autonomy than others.

Age of women, husband-wife age difference, marital duration and total number of children were having significant effect on women's autonomy both among the members and non-members. Age of women and marital duration were having significantly positive effect on women's autonomy both among the members and non-members. Women who had only two children were having significantly higher autonomy than others both among the members and non-members. Women who had love marriage had significantly higher autonomy than others among the members.

All the mass media variables except reading were having significantly positive effect on women's autonomy both among the members and non-members.
5.11 Women's Autonomy and Fertility Behaviour

(Education of women is an important factor in reducing fertility both among the members and non-members. Though women's autonomy showed significant differences in the level of fertility both among the members and non-members, the relationship was not consistent. Among the members, Hindu women seemed to have high fertility than others and Muslim women seemed to have high fertility than others among the non-members. Lower caste women both among the members and non-members had high fertility compared to others. (Standard of living has negative effect on fertility both among the members and non-members.)

Women involved in income earning economic activities seemed to have lower fertility both among the members and non-members. Women in nuclear families seemed to have high fertility than women in joint families both among the members and non-members. (Younger women aged 19 years or less seemed to have lower fertility than older women. Autonomy did make significant difference in the level of fertility both among the members and non-members. (It is observed that high autonomy women both among the members and non-members had lower fertility than others. Increase in age at marriage decrease fertility both among the members and non-members. Women's autonomy seemed to have significant influence on fertility only among women who got married at ages 19-20 years. Husband wife age difference did not make any difference in the level of fertility both among the members and non-members. Irrespective of the level of autonomy, the mean number of children ever born increased with number of female children both among the members and non-members.)

Women's autonomy did not make any significant difference in fertility for any of the marital characteristics variable among the members. However, among the non-members, women's autonomy seemed to have negative effect on fertility among women who had consanguineous marriage, with person from maternal side and among those who had arranged marriage.)
Women who had high level of exposure to mass media had lower fertility compared to those who had no exposure or low level of exposure among the members. However among the non-members, the level of fertility seemed to decrease consistently with the increase in the level of exposure to mass media, Autonomy of women did not show any consistent relationship with fertility.

Proportion of women who had three or more number of living children was comparatively higher among the members (32.1 per cent) than among the non-members (25.8 per cent). The mean duration of child bearing years increased with women's autonomy among the members and decreased with women's autonomy among the non-members. However, the differences are not significant both among the members and non-members.

(Overall, the results of the analysis of data related to the fertility behaviour of women who had completed their fertility at the time of interview revealed that 66.4 per cent of members and 57 per cent of non-members had completed their fertility.) (The mean number of children ever born was 2.39 for members and 2.31 for non-members. The mean number of children ever born decreased with the increase in autonomy both among the members and non-members?) Education, standard of living and age at marriage had significantly negative effect on fertility both among the members and non-members. Young women had significantly fewer children than older women both among the members and non-members.

The mean age at first birth was comparatively less among the members (19.64 years) than non-members (20.36 years). The mean age at last birth was also less among the members (23.08 years) than non-members (23.50 years). The reproductive span (child bearing) was slightly higher for members than non-members. Interestingly, higher proportion of low autonomy women among the members had completed their fertility without male child. However, among the non-members, higher proportion of high autonomy women had completed their fertility without male child.
5.12 Women's Autonomy and Family Planning Practices

Most of the women both among the members and non-members were aware of at least one method of family planning was nearly universal - both among the members and non-members. Knowledge of temporary methods increased with autonomy of women. The current use of contraception was 75.5 per cent among the members and 57.3 per cent among the non-members. The adoption of family planning increased with autonomy of women both among the members and non-members. In general, women's autonomy seemed to have significant influence on the adoption of family planning methods both among the members and non-members. Adoption was more among the members than non-members. Adoption of temporary methods was more among the non-members than members. The mean age at the time of adoption of family planning method was around 22 years both among the members and non-members. Women's autonomy did not make any significant difference in the decision making process both among the members and non-members.

5.13 Conclusion and Policy Implication

The results of the study revealed that on a scale from 0 to 128, the mean autonomy was 87.55 for members and 74.56 for non-members. Further, the mean autonomy score was consistently high for members than non-members for all the eight dimensions autonomy. Members' autonomy was substantially more in freedom of movement, participation in social and political activities, financial management, and household decisions. Thus, the results clearly indicate that membership in Self-Help Group significantly improved women's autonomy and thereby helped them to get more status in the family and in the society as a whole.

Education, involvement in income earning economic activities and exposure to mass media further strengthen women's autonomy in the decision making process within and outside home. These factors have influence on women's autonomy both among the members and non-members. The mean number of children ever born was slightly more among members than non-members. This is due to the fact that the members are mostly from poor socio-economic status and
hence their fertility is little higher than the non-members. The members had started their child bearing little earlier and also completed little earlier than the non-members. However, the mean duration of child bearing was slightly higher for members than non-members.

Membership in Self-Help Group seemed to have helped women to minimize the gap in the fertility level between the poor and the rich (2.39 vs. 2.31). In the long run, self-help group movement will certainly help women to reduce fertility to the desired level. Higher autonomy women seemed to have lower fertility both among the members and non-members. Thus women’s autonomy seemed to have significant influence on fertility.

The knowledge of female sterilization was nearly universal both among the members and non-members. Higher autonomy women seemed to have more knowledge on various family planning methods than others both among the members and non-members. Adoption of family planning methods was substantially more among the members than non-members. Adoption of any one of the family planning methods was more among the members than non-members. Husband-wife communication about family planning and family size was slightly more among members than non-members. Further, husband-wife communication about family planning was comparatively low among low autonomy women than others both among the members and non-members.

(Overall, the results of the study strongly suggest that self help group movement is a reckoning force in improving women's autonomy at home and in the society as a whole. It is also influencing women's fertility behaviour and family planning adoption directly as well as through improvement in the autonomy of women. Hence, it is suggested that the Self Help Group (SHG) movement should further be strengthened and sustained in order to make rural poor women to attain more autonomy to take independent decisions including their fertility and family planning adoption. The training component of self help groups should adequately cover the population issues including fertility and family planning in order to reduce fertility for a sustainable development in India.)