INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

In most of the developing countries today, more and more emphasis is laid on the need for development of women and their active participation in the mainstream of development process. It is also widely recognized that apart from managing household, bearing children, women bring income with productive activities ranging from traditional work in the fields to working in factories or running small and petty businesses. They have also proven that they can be better entrepreneurs and development managers in any kind of human development activities. Therefore, it is important and utmost necessary to make women empowered in taking decisions to enable them to be in the central part of any human development process. The empowerment of women also considered as an active process enabling women to realize their full identity and power in all spheres of life.

Against the background of the patriarchal system of society, the women need special attention to ensure their development and participation in the decision making process at home, in the community and governance. Hence, what needed is a conducive environment to maximize their potentials. This conducive environment should include basic amenities such as better health and nutrition, education and sensitization to their rights and protection under the law and employment opportunities, etc.

Development experience shows that gender inequalities are a major factor impeding progress towards the Millennium Development Goals of poverty reduction. Women are generally very involved in productive work but lack
of access to assets they need to play that role effectively. As a result of this imbalance, women are often more vulnerable to poverty than men. As long as the disadvantaged suffer from economic deprivation and livelihood insecurity, women will not be in a position to mobilize (UNDP, 2001). In order to rectify and challenge the existing disparities and barriers women should need basic capabilities, self-confidence, social mobilization and collective agency. The process of social mobilization accompanied with economic security is the crucial root for empowerment.

In many developing countries, especially in South Asia, one strategy which has been found to be promising is participatory institution building in the Self Help Groups (SHGs), often coupled with savings and micro credit loans (ESCAP, 2002). SHGs have emerged as an important strategy for empowering women and alleviating poverty. SHGs are based on idea of dialogic small groups which shall function at developing collective consciousness. Linked with micro-credit, these groups are able to access credit and subsidy to meet crisis needs as well as developmental needs reducing their dependence on money-lenders.

The SHG system has proven to be very relevant and effective in offering women the possibility to break gradually away from exploitation and isolation. There is ample evidence that SHG approach is very effective, efficient and relevant tool for organizing and empowering the poor, problems do arise with design, development and introduction of programmes to promote income generating activities that will generate sufficient sustainable and regular income.
1.2 EMPOWERMENT

Empowerment is now increasingly seen as a process by which the one’s without power gain greater control over their lives. This means control over material assets, intellectual resources and ideology. It involves power to, power with and power within. Some define empowerment is a process of awareness and capacity building leading to greater participation, to greater decision-making power and control and transformative action. This involves ability to get what one wants and to influence others on our concerns. With reference to women, the power relation that has to be involved includes their lives at multiple levels, family, community, market and the state. Importantly it involves at the psychological level women's ability to assert them and this is constructed by the 'gender roles' assigned to her especially in a cultural which resists change like India.

Empowerment of women signifies harnessing women power by conscientizing their tremendous potential and encouraging them to work towards attaining a dignified and satisfying way of life through confidence and competence as person with self-respect, rights and responsibilities. Empowerment as a concept was introduced at the International Women’s Conference at Nairobi in 1980. The conference defined empowerment as “A redistribution of social power and control of resources in favour of women. Empowerment is a multi-faceted process which encompasses many aspects, that is, enhancing awareness, increasing access to resources of economic, social and political etc”.

In recent years women empowerment has become a subject of great concern for the nations all over the world especially in poor and
developing countries. The impact of globalization is seen eventually on position of women in some form or other in most of the developing countries with the variation of degree. The United Nations has also strived hard in an incredible way to draw the due attention of the World Community on this issue in the past year. The questions surrounding women's empowerment, the condition and position of women have now become critical to the human rights based approaches to development.

The Cairo conference in 1994 organized by United Nation on Population and Development called attention to women's empowerment as a central focus and Untied Nations Development Programme (UNDP) developed the Gender Empowerment measure (GEM) which focuses on the three variables that reflect women's participation in society – political power or decision-making, education and health. UNDP (1995) report was devoted to women's empowerment and it declared that if human development is not engendered it is endangered a declaration which almost frequently repeated for further development measuring and policy planning. Equality, sustainability and empowerment were emphasized and the stress was, that women's emancipation does not depend on national income but is an engaged political process.

The World Bank has suggested that empowerment of women should be a key aspect of social development programs (World Bank, 2001). India has also ratified various international Conventions committed to securing equal rights to women. The ‘National Policy for the Empowerment of Women’, 2001 states that, “The women’s movement and a widespread network of NGOs which have strong grassroots presence and deep insight into
women’s concerns have contributed in inspiring initiatives for the empowerment of women”.

However, the policy also speaks of “a wide gap between the goals enunciated in the Constitution, legislative policies, plans, programmes, and the related mechanisms on the one hand and the situational reality of the status of women in India, on the other. Gender equality manifests itself in various forms, the most obvious being the trend of continuously declining female ratio in the population in the last few decades. Social stereotyping and violence at the domestic and societal levels are some of the other manifestations”.

Kabeer’s view of empowerment refers to the processes by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such ability. The fundamentals of empowerment have been defined as agency (the ability to define one’s goals and act upon them), awareness of gendered power structures, self-esteem and self-confidence (Kabeer, 2001). He also points out that a distinction has to be made about the type of choice, and the focus necessarily has to be on strategic life choices, that is choices that shape livelihoods or are ‘critical for people to live the lives they want’. The expansion in the range of potential choices available to women includes three inter-related dimensions that are inseparable in determining the meaning of an indicator and hence its validity as a measure of empowerment. These dimensions are:

**Resources** - The pre-condition necessary for women to be able to exercise choice; women must have access and future claims to material, human and social resources.
Agency - The process of decision-making, including negotiation, deception and manipulation that permit women to define their goals and act upon them.

Achievements - The well-being outcomes that women experience as a result of access to resources and agency.

Mayoux’s (2003) definition of empowerment relates more directly with power, as “a multidimensional and interlinked process of change in power relations”. It consists of:

‘Power within’ enabling women to articulate their own aspirations and strategies for change;

‘Power to’ enabling women to develop the necessary skills and access the necessary resources to achieve their aspirations;

‘Power with’ enabling women to examine and articulate their collective interests, to organize, to achieve them and to link with other women and men’s organizations for change; and

‘Power over’ changing the underlying inequalities in power and resources that constrain women’s aspirations and their ability to achieve them. These power relations operate in different spheres of life (e.g., economic, social, political) and at different levels (e.g., individual, household, community, market, institutional).

UNDP has identified two crucial routes as imperative for empowerment. The first is social mobilization and collective agency, as poor women often
lack the basic capabilities and self-confidence to counter and challenge existing disparities and barriers against them. Often, change agents are needed to catalyze social mobilization consciously. Second, the process of social mobilization needs to be accompanied and complemented by economic security. As long as the disadvantaged suffer from economic deprivation and livelihood insecurity, they will not be in a position to mobilize (UNDP, 2001). In many developing countries (especially in South Asia), one strategy which has been found to be promising is participatory institution building in the self-help groups, often coupled with savings and micro credit loans (ESCAP, 2002).

Rahman, (1999) has identified three ‘paradigms’ on micro-finance and gender. The ‘financial self-sustainability paradigm’, currently dominant within most donor agencies and USAID, World Bank, UNDP, etc. assumes that increasing women’s access to micro-finance services will lead to individual economic empowerment, well-being and social and political empowerment. It provides little opportunity for client participation, group self-management or autonomy. The ‘Poverty Alleviation Paradigm’ has its rationale for targeting women, because of higher levels of female poverty and women’s responsibility for household well-being.

The ‘feminist empowerment paradigm’ is based on a mutual or self-help approach pioneered in India in the early 1980s. It is rooted in the development of some of the earliest micro-finance programmes in the South, particularly Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) and Working Women’s Forum (WWF) in India. It emphasizes high levels of group ownership, control and management.
The Human Development Report 1995, stresses that empowerment is about participation. Development must be by people, not only for them. People must participate fully in the decisions and processes that shape their lives but at the same time promotes a rather instrumentalist view of empowerment; Investing in women’s capabilities and empowering them to exercise their choices is not only valuable in itself but is also the surest way to contribute to economic growth and overall development.

For Oxfam, empowerment is about challenging oppression and inequality: Empowerment involves challenging the forms of oppression, which compel millions of people to play a part in their society on terms, which are inequitable, or in ways, which deny their human rights (Oxfam, 1995).

Feminist activists stress that the women empowerment is not about replacing one form of empowerment with another: Women’s empowerment should lead to the liberation of men from false value systems and ideologies of oppression. It should lead to a situation where each one can become a whole being regardless of gender, and use their fullest potential to construct a more humane society for all (Batliwala, 1994).

Rowlands point out that empowerment is a bottom-up process and cannot be bestowed from the top down: The outside professional cannot expect to control the outcomes of authentic of empowerment being given by one group to another hide an attempt to keep control (Rowlands, 1995).

Whilst understanding of power and empowerment has come from many different movements and traditions, the feminist movement has
emphasized collective organization (power with) and has been influential in developing ideas about power within. Power must be understood as working at different levels, including the institutional, the household and the individual. For some theorists power is a zero-sum: one group’s increase in power necessarily involves another’s loss of power. The idea of a redistribution of power is therefore seen as necessarily involving conflict. In this perspective, women’s empowerment would lead by implication to less power for men.

Some feminist writers on power have challenged the idea that power must necessarily involve domination by some, and obedience or oppression of others. Men would also benefit from the results of women’s empowerment with the chance to live in a more equitable society and explore new roles. The kinds of power described above as power-to, power-with and power-within can be developed as alternatives to power over.

The World Bank’s Empowerment and Poverty Reduction: A Source book, defines empowerment in its broadest sense as the “expansion of freedom of choice and action” (Narayan, 2002). United Nations (2001) define empowerment as the processes by which women take control and ownership of their lives through expansion of their choices. Empowerment is a process whereby constraints that impede equal participation are reduced so that the inequality starts moving towards becoming equality.

In the context of development, (economic/social/political), empowerment cannot be given to anyone, nor is it a goal that can be reached by an organization or state. A process takes place wherein an inequality moves towards becoming equality. The inequality that has to alter into equality is
the inequality in participation in the various processes of development. These can range from education, health services, housing, livelihoods, employment, remuneration, etc.

1.3 WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Empowerment of women is nothing but strengthening of their innate vitality” (Papa, 1991). It is humanization of humanity. It can be done through acquiring knowledge, power and experience. It is a sense of internal strength and confidence to face life, the right to determine choices in life and the ability to influence a social process that affects their lives.

Sureka and Rajamanamma (1999) described empowerment as an important process through which women are enabled to realize their full identity and power in all spheres of life. Sudharani et al (2000) defined empowerment as the process of challenging existing power relation and of gaining greater control over the source of power. Empowerment is a process of awareness and capacity building leading to greater participation, greater decision-making power and control and to transformative action.

SHGs are ideal and comprehensive target groups for literacy training as the members are highly motivated and also mentioned that micro credit coupled with literacy can truly make 21st Century, the Century of women (Suriakanti, 2000).

Women members are economically empowered where, about 496 SHGs have generated group savings of about 30 lakhs, which they are
circulating among themselves and also stated that involvement of SHG members in economic activity have helped women to gain respect and self-confidence (Joshi, 2004). SHG members have been earning between 500 – 6000 rupees since taking up various income generating activities. Participation of women SHG members in group meetings, trainings and exposure visits has led to confidence building and self-esteem amongst women and organization of women into SHG as fulfilled the need of rural women for a platform for social interaction.

The activities of the SHGs have succeeded in achieving empowerment of women both economically and socially and the perception of the stakeholders regarding the effectiveness of SHGs was highly satisfactory, positive and encouraging while attempting to improve the programme further (Vashishta and Kunwar, 2004).

Wadiwale (2004) explained in study that in Baroda City slum women were empowered by saving-credit programme and educational status of respondents in terms of their attitudinal change to various issues is considerably high. A study on empowerment through watershed development in Kolar District of Karnataka State revealed that the members of the Self Help Groups are empowered now, to clear off their old debts through their savings and have started economic activities like goat rearing, milk selling etc. (Sudhindra, 2005).

1.4 WOMEN EMPOWERMENT FRAMEWORK

UNICEF has adopted the Women’s Empowerment Framework, developed by S.Longwe (1990), as an appropriate approach to be used in
mainstreaming gender. The framework states that women's development can be viewed in terms of five levels of equality, of which empowerment is an essential elements at each level. The levels are:

**Welfare**  - This addresses only the basic needs of women, without recognizing or attempting to solve the underlying structural causes which necessitate provision of welfare services. Women are merely passive beneficiaries of welfare benefits.

**Access**  - Equality of access to resources such as educational opportunities, land and credit is essential for women to make meaningful progress. The path of empowerment is initiated when women recognize lack of access to resources as barrier to their growth and overall well-being and take action to redress this.

**Awareness-raising**  - For women to take appropriate action to close gender gaps or gender inequalities there must be recognition that their problem stem from inherent structural and institutional discrimination. They must also recognize the role that women themselves often play in reinforcing the system that restricts their growth.

**Participation**  - This is the point where women take decisions equally alongside men. Mobilization is necessary in order to reach this level. Women will be empowered to gain increased representation, by organizing themselves and working collectively, which will lead to increased empowerment and ultimately greater control.
**Control** - The ultimate level of equality and empowerment, where there is a balance of power between women and men and neither has dominance. Women are able to make decisions regarding their lives and the lives of their children and play an active role in the development process. The contributions of women are fully recognized and rewarded (UNICEF, 1994).

1.5 **UNDP AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT**

UNDP’s Gender in Development Goal explicitly uses the language of empowerment. Gender mainstreaming of all UNDP activities is promoted as a means to achieve this goal which includes:

- Facilitating national development planning and United Nations system coordination to implement the Beijing Platform for Action;

- Integrating gender analysis and gender equality practices into poverty elimination policies and programmes;

- Facilitating and extending policy dialogue on sustainable human development issues to both Governments and civil society so that this dialogue includes all relevant gender dimensions; and

- Advocating and promoting the empowerment of women in political and economic decision-making at all levels from the household to national Government and in local, national and international administrative structures.
The UNDP’s Gender in Development Policy (GIDP) has been developed to assist regional bureau and programme countries achieve the UNDP goal. This policy has a two pronged approach; firstly mainstreaming gender, and secondly, the advancement of women. It builds on the areas identified by representatives of women’s organizations from around the world in the course of recent world conferences:

- Fostering an enabling environment for the advancement of women;
  and

- Promoting the empowerment of women.

Fostering an enabling environment is stated in terms of encouraging gender sensitive legal and policy frameworks, assisting women to gain control over social and economic assets and resources, and promoting gender sensitive poverty indicators, macro-economic frameworks and sector analyses.

UNDP proposes to promote the empowerment of women through:

- Promotion of women in policy and decision-making processes and positions;

- Emphasizing women’s income-generating activities;

- Providing women with access to empowering facilities (such as education, orientation and training of all kinds).
The GIDP also emphasizes the objective of constituency building and partnerships through identifying relevant constituencies, and networking with them in order to strengthen linkages with development partners in civil society.

1.5.1 EMPOWERMENT THROUGH DECISION–MAKING POWERS

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has recently adopted a Gender in Development Goal, which includes a commitment to advocating and promoting the empowerment of women in political and economic decision-making at all levels from the household to national Government and in local, national and international administrative structures. Concretely, it is suggested that empowerment will be promoted through increasing women’s decision-making powers, the support of income generating activities and provision of skills and education to women. No explicit links are made between UNDP’s mainstreaming strategy (also part of the Gender in Development Goal) and its agenda for empowering women.

1.6 INDICATORS OF EMPOWERMENT

The claims for women’s empowerment to be the goal or ultimate objective of many development policies and programmes leads to a demand for indicators of empowerment, both to reveal the extent to which women are already empowered, and to evaluate if such policies and programmes have been effective towards their stated aims. There are a variety of ways in which indicators of empowerment can be developed. Each have some value, but none can be taken as complete measures, because the nature
of empowerment as a multi-faceted concept means that it is not readily quantifiable.

1.6.1 CIDA’S EMPOWERMENT INDICATORS

The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) has developed a range of indicators of women’s empowerment, both quantitative and qualitative. They state that projects with empowerment objectives should specify the type of empowerment (e.g. personal change in consciousness, change in social and economic order), the rough time scales within which the project objectives will be accomplished, the numbers of people to be affected, and the degree to which they will be affected. Many of their empowerment indicators are process indicators. CIDA break down empowerment into legal, political, economic and social empowerment, for the purposes of quantitative indicators. They also suggest a range of qualitative indicators to accompany quantitative ones (CIDA, 1996).

CIDA argue that because of the complex nature of measuring empowerment, qualitative and quantitative indicators need to be underpinned by qualitative analysis. Some key questions for the qualitative analysis suggested are:

- How have changes in national / local legislation empowered or disempowered women or men (e.g. concerning control over resources such as land?)

- What is the role of local institutions in empowering / disempowering women/men?
• Is the part of women as compared to men, are playing in major decisions in their locality/household increasing or decreasing?

• Is there more acknowledgement of the importance of tasks customarily carried out by women, e.g. child care?

• How are women organizing to increase their empowerment, for example against violence?

• If employment and education for women are increasing, is this leading to greater empowerment?

1.6.2 HUMAN DEVELOPMENT REPORT’s EMPOWERMENT INDICATORS

It is helpful to divide indicators of empowerment into two categories: those which attempt to measure women’s empowerment at a broad societal level, in order to gain information and make comparisons, and those which are developed in order to measure the effects of specific projects or programmes. The Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) of the Human Development Report (HDR) (UNDP, 1995) falls into the first of these categories. Indicators developed in the context of credit programmes in Bangladesh provide an example of the second (Hashemi et al, 1996).

GENDER EMPOWERMENT MEASURE (GEM)

The Human Development Report (1995) states empowerment as one of the four essential components of the human development paradigm, the others being productivity, equity, and sustainability. Empowerment is
described as people fully participating in the decisions and processes that shape their lives. It introduces two new indices, the gender empowerment measure (GEM) and the gender-related development index (GDI). The GDI attempts to measure countries achievements in the basic capabilities covered by the HDI, taking note of the inequalities in achievement between women and men, and penalizing for inequality. Countries with greater gender disparity in basic capabilities (life expectancy, educational attainment, and income) will have low GDIs compared to their HDI.

The GEM is a composite indicator which looks at women's representation in parliaments, women's share of positions classified as managerial and professional, women's participation in the active labour force, and their share of national income. It aims to examine whether women and men are able to actively participate in economic and political life and take part in decision making. The HDR states that while the GDI focuses on the expansion of capabilities, the GEM is concerned with the use of those capabilities to take advantage of the opportunities of life.

The GEM shows that access to basic needs, economic, education and health, does not in itself automatically mean empowerment for women. This is revealed by the fact that a number of countries have very low GEM values compared with their GDI values. These include France, Japan and Greece, United Kingdom, Ireland and Spain. Developing countries with very low GEM values compared to their GDI values include the Republic of Korea, Turkey, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates and Mauritius.

Nor does high GDP per capita necessarily equate with high GEM values. In East Asia and Southeast Asia, some countries, including Japan, the
Republic of Korea and Singapore rank much higher in terms of GDP per capita than in GEM, with, for example, Korea, ranking 28 in GDP per capita but 90 in the GEM. Economic and political participation (as measured) is often low in these countries accounting for low GEMs. Some developing countries have higher GEMs than some developed countries. For example, China, Cuba and Costa Rica have higher GEM values than Japan or France.

Because of lack of available sex disaggregated data, GEM is not available for all countries. Also, lack of comparability between the ways in which data is defined and collected between different countries means that using GEM to compare the degree of women’s empowerment in across countries is not appropriate. Rather, it can be used to monitor, over time, progress in improving women’s involvement in economic and political life and disparity between other development indicators and empowerment in particular countries. It is a useful additional indicator to other macro level figures, which may highlight gender gaps in development and suggests a need for reorientation of programme priorities.

However, it has limitations in that, for example, quantitative measures of political participation in formal politics may not accurately reflect the degree of power which women are able to exercise. Moreover, degree of participation of women in professional and managerial roles reflects mainly advancement of middle class women.
EMPOWERMENT INDICATORS IN CREDIT PROGRAMMES

Other attempts to devise indicators for women’s empowerment, define women’s empowerment more on the personal rather than the institutional level. This can produce culturally specific indicators. For example, Hashemi et al (1996), in their research on rural women’s empowerment in Bangladesh concentrate on the individual experiences of women as they interact both within the community and the village community. Confronted with the problem of how to translate conceptual categories into identifiable, observable, empirical indicators, they choose to concentrate on the individual in order to ensure detailed observations of the subtleties involved in societal transformations.

Hashemi et al (1996) undertook ethnographic research in six villages for four years to measure the effects of programmes on the empowerment of women. Two villages were Grameen Bank villages, two were BRAC villages, and the other two had no credit programmes. They used a model based on eight indicators of empowerment which were:

✓ Mobility;

✓ Economic security;

✓ Ability to make small purchases;

✓ Ability to make large purchases;

✓ Involvement in major household decisions;
✓ Relative freedom from domination within the family;

✓ Political and legal awareness; and

✓ Involvement in political campaigning and protests.

1.7 ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT THROUGH CREDIT PROGRAMMES

Microcredit programmes, many targeting women and claiming to empower them, have become extremely popular among donors and NGOs in recent years. The change in development policies from the focus on women’s active role in production as a means to more efficient development, to the approach of women’s empowerment through women organizing for greater self-reliance, has also meant a change in policies for the enhancement of women’s economic role.

The focus has changed from providing grants to financial assistance to women through the establishment of special credit schemes. Credit schemes are seen as having the potential to link women with the formal banking sector and thereby integrating women in mainstream development (Von Bülow et al, 1995). Many credit schemes aimed at women attempt to follow the model of well-known micro-credit providers such as the Grameen Bank. The problems of high administration costs and lack of collateral of small-scale women borrowers are overcome by establishing borrower solidarity groups based on joint liability.

The ability of credit schemes to promote women’s empowerment has come under close scrutiny. Research on credit programmes has shown
that apparently successful credit programmes targeting credit to women cannot be taken at face value without a more careful examination of the social context in which women live.

1.8 CREDIT FOR WOMEN IN RURAL BANGLADESH

A study of rural credit programmes in Bangladesh highlighted the problems of ascertaining who actually had control over credit, as research showed that a significant proportion of women’s loans were in fact controlled by male relatives (Goetz and Gupta, 1996). High repayment rates of loans by women can not be taken as clear evidence that women have made effective loan investments, or that they have been empowered through the loan. Where men take control of loans and invest them badly, women’s position may even be worsened, as women may be forced to mobilize repayment funds from resources which would otherwise be used for consumption or savings. The control of loans and repayment are also potential sources of gender related tension within rural households. Improving women’s access to credit is a positive step, but is by no means enough to secure their economic empowerment.

Many microcredit/microenterprise initiatives can be viewed as promoting a narrowly individualistic definition of empowerment, and as ignoring the collective dimension of empowerment. By offering women credit, their lack of access to capital is treated as a technical problem which outsiders can identify and tackle without actually committing to deeper structural transformations (Von Bülow et al, 1995).
Ironically, the very success of credit programmes such as the Grameen Bank, may lead to a reduction in the practice of including social development and institution building components. Goetz and Sen Gupta argue that donors' interests in seeing the development of financially self-sustaining credit programmes has led to quantitative goals for credit delivery and recovery supplanting more qualitative and elusive social change objectives (Goetz and Gupta, 1996).

1.9 NATIONAL POLICY FOR THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN INDIA, (2001)

The principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles. The Constitution not only grants equality to women, but also empowers the State to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women. Within the framework of a democratic polity, our laws, development policies, Plans and programmes have aimed at women’s advancement in different spheres. From the Fifth Five Year Plan (1974-78) onwards has been a marked shift in the approach to women’s issues from welfare to development. In recent years, the empowerment of women has been recognized as the central issue in determining the status of women.

The National Commission for Women was set up by an Act of Parliament in 1990 to safeguard the rights and legal entitlements of women. The 73rd and 74th Amendments (1993) to the Constitution of India have provided for reservation of seats in the local bodies of Panchayats and
Municipalities for women, laying a strong foundation for their participation in decision making at the local levels.

**Goal and Objectives of the Policy**

The goal of this Policy is to bring about the advancement, development and empowerment of women. The Policy will be widely disseminated so as to encourage active participation of all stakeholders for achieving its goals. Specifically, the objectives of this Policy include:

- Creating an environment through positive economic and social policies for full development of women to enable them to realize their full potential;

- The de-jure and de-facto enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedom by women on equal basis with men in all spheres – political, economic, social, cultural and civil;

- Equal access to participation and decision making of women in social, political and economic life of the nation;

- Equal access to women to health care, quality education at all levels, career and vocational guidance, employment, equal remuneration, occupational health and safety, social security and public office etc;

- Strengthening legal systems aimed at elimination of all forms of discrimination against women;
 Changing societal attitudes and community practices by active participation and involvement of both men and women;

 Mainstreaming a gender perspective in the development process;

 Elimination of discrimination and all forms of violence against women and the girl child; and

 Building and strengthening partnerships with civil society, particularly women’s organizations.

1.10 POLICY APPROACHES TO WOMEN

“Nothing, arguably, is as important today in the political economy of development as an adequate recognition of political, economic, and social participation and leadership of women” (Amartya Sen, 1995). While a large part of the world continues to look at women’s issues in terms of paternalism and well-being, the concept of women's empowerment in the social, political, and economic order as a pre-requisite of human development is hardly given the priority that it deserves.

Throughout the Third World, particularly in the past 15 years, there has been a proliferation of policies, programmes, and projects designed to assist low-income women. This concern for low-income women’s needs has coincided historically with recognition of their important role in development. Since 1950’s, many different intervention strategies have been formulated to address women’s needs which reflect changes in
macro-level economic and social policy approaches to Third World Development, as well as in state policy towards women.

The welfare approach introduced in the 1950’s and followed through the 1960’s may be considered the earliest policy approach concerned with women in developing countries (Moser, 1989). Here, women are seen as passive recipients of development, rather than participants in the development process. The reproductive role of women is recognized and policy seeks to meet practical gender needs through that role by top-down handouts of food aid, measures against malnutrition, and family planning. As such, it did not include women in participatory planning processes.

However, by 1970, the limitations and the critique of the welfare approach became obvious and resulted in the development of a number of alternative approaches based on equity, poverty alleviation, efficiency, and empowerment. These approaches are not entirely mutually exclusive and have been categorized, in general as the women in development (WID) approach.

The original WID approach was the equity approach, introduced during the 1975 -1985 UN Women’s Decade. Its purpose is to gain equity for women in the development process. Women are seen as active participants in development. It seeks to meet strategic gender needs through direct state intervention giving political and economic autonomy to women, and thus reducing inequality with men. It acknowledges that they must be ‘brought into’ the development process through access to employment and the market place.
However, equity programmes encountered problems from the outset. The lack of a single unified indicator of social status and of baseline information about women’s economic, social, and political status meant that there were no standards against which ‘success’ could be measured. Politically the majority of development agencies were hostile to the programmes because of their intention to meet not only practical gender needs but also strategic gender needs whose very success depended on an implicit redistribution of power.

The anti-poverty approach, the second WID approach, the ‘toned down’ version of equity was also introduced in the 1970’s. This approach to women focuses mainly on their productive role, on the basis that poverty alleviation and the promotion of balanced economic growth require the increased productivity of women in low-income households. It aims to increase the employment and income-generating options of poor women through better access to productive resources.

It was soon realized, however, that though the approach might meet practiced gender needs by augmenting their income, unless employment leads to greater autonomy, it would not meet strategic gender needs. Moreover, the income-generating programmes implemented under the assumption that women have free time, often succeed only by extending their working day and increasing their burden.

The purpose of the efficiency approach – the now predominant WID approach – is to ensure that development is made efficient and effective through women’s economic contribution. Women’s participation is equated with equity for women. It seeks to meet practical gender needs.
Experience illustrates the fact that the efficiency approach only meets practical gender needs at the cost of longer working hours and increased unpaid work. In most cases, this approach failed to reach any strategic gender needs.

The empowerment approach is the most recent and is aimed at empowering women through greater self-reliance and internal strength. It seeks to meet strategic gender needs indirectly through bottom-up mobilization around practical gender needs. When the first welfare approach recognizes only the reproductive role of women and utilizes women's organization as a top-down means of delivering services, the empowerment approach recognizes the triple role of women and seeks through bottom-up women's organizations to raise women's consciousness to challenge their subordination. A diverse range of women's organization including Self-Help Groups (SHGs) has developed in this context conveying a multitude of issues and purposes.

1.11 THE CONCEPT AND DEFINITION OF SELF HELP GROUPS (SHGs)

Experience in many countries demonstrates that poor women make investments wisely and earn returns. However, the flow of financial assistance to them was too marginal, if at all, to enable them to cross the poverty line. The need to create a grassroots organizational base to enable women to come together, to analyze their issues and problems themselves, and to fulfill their needs was strongly advocated. In fact, experience shows that some of the successful ‘group-based participatory programmes’ have made significant improvement in the conditions of
living poor women. The concept of self-help groups gained significance, especially after 1976 when Prof. Mohammed Yunus of Bangladesh began experimenting with micro-credit and women SHGs. The strategy made a quiet revolution in Bangladesh in poverty eradication by empowering the poor women.

SHGs are small informal associations created for enabling members to reap economic benefit out of mutual help, solidarity and joint responsibility. The benefits include mobilization of savings and credit facilities and pursuit of group enterprise activities. The group-based approach not only enables the poor to accumulate capital by way of small savings but also helps them to get access to formal credit facilities (Shylendra, 1999).

Rao (1994) defined SHGs as a means of raising the claim, making capacity of the rural poor for reaching out to such agencies as they are willing to work with and which can provide them with additional production resources. It also implies the development of their bargaining power to an extent that such agencies cannot culturally impose their conditions and regulations upon the rural poor as passive recipients.

As stated by NABARD (1995) SHG is a homogeneous group of rural poor voluntarily formed to save whatever amount they can conveniently save out of their earnings and mutually agree to contribute to a common fund from which to lend to members for productive and emergent credit needs. Singh (1995) conceptualized an informal association of individuals which comes together voluntarily for promotion of economic and social objectives. Dwaraki et al (1996) described an SHG as an unregistered body of people, preferably and disadvantaged who willingly contribute an
agreed sum of money which would be lent at a price for a short period, as fixed by the group itself.

Krishnamurthy (1996) conceptualized SHG as an organization formed by people for pooling their resources to help each other. Roul (1996) defined as an institutional framework for individuals or households who have agreed to cooperate on a continuing basis to pursue one or more objectives. Kurtz (1997) stated that the SHG concept got extended to areas in which emphasis was upon emotional and physical disabilities rather than social problem alone.

Federation of small group oriented to assisting fellow of sufferers of diseases, compulsions and interpersonal problems in the United States. Karmakar (1998) indicated SHG as an informal group of people where members pool their savings and re-lend within the group on informal basis. Thomas (1998) described SHG as a homogenous group of rural poor voluntarily formed to save small amount out of their earnings which is convenient to all the members and agreed upon by all to form a common fund corpus for the group and to its members for meeting their productive and emergent credit needs.

These groups by way of joint liability enable the poor to overcome the problem of collateral security and thus free them from the clutches of moneylenders. The joint liability not only improves group members’ accessibility to credit, but also creates mechanisms like peer monitoring leading to better loan recoveries. Besides, some of the basic characteristics of SHGs like small size of membership and homogeneity of
composition bring about cohesiveness and effective participation of members in the functioning of the group (Fernandez, 1994).

From the above definitions, it is clear that basically SHG is a small group of people gathered on voluntary basis with the objective to save money and utilize it to meet out their requirements and / or take up small Income Generating Activities in order to empower themselves.

1.12 WOMEN SHGs

One of the powerful approaches to women empowerment and entrepreneurship is the formation of Self Help Groups (SHGs) especially among women. This strategy had fetched noticeable results not only in India and Bangladesh but world over. "Women self-help groups are increasingly being used as tool for various developmental interventions. Credit and its delivery through self-help groups have also been taken as a means for empowerment of rural women. This integrated approach, whereby, credit is only an entry point, and an instrument to operationalise other aspects of group dynamics and management, also caters to the need for social intermediation of these groups.

A Self Help Group is conceived as a sustainable people’s institution that provides the poor rural women with space and support necessary for them to take effective steps towards achieving greater control of their lives. The SHG approach has proved successful not only in improving the economic conditions through income generation but in creating awareness about health and hygiene, sanitation and cleanliness, environmental protection, importance of education and better response for development schemes.
Through organizing informal Self Help Groups, women in India are provided credit and extension support for various production-oriented income generating activities. These activities usually include garment making, embroidery, food processing, bee keeping, basketry, gem cutting, weaving, and knitting. SHGs are self-governed, with decisions about production and marketing taken collectively, although the group leader is responsible for identifying potential marketing centers and consumers. These groups represent a new culture in rural development, breaking with traditional bureaucracy and top-down management. Informal groups empower rural women to manage rural industries and make decisions collectively for their common economic interests.

Studies on the development of informal women's groups in India, shows how it is possible to avoid the 'top-down management' and bureaucracy that often contribute to the failure of other schemes. Informal self-help groups in rural areas serve to empower women, and provide a basis for the provision of credit and other support for various production and income-generation activities.

According to a survey conducted by Centre for Bharatiya Marketing Development (CBMD), the highest number of SHGs is found in the southern states. On average southern states constitutes 65% SHGs, eastern 13%, central 11%, northern 5% and western 6% at the national scene. Andhra Pradesh, followed by Tamilnadu, has the highest number of women SHGs working independently and setting up a micro enterprise, which helps in income generation. The benefits that can be reaped by the grouping together of poor women in rural areas are many.
1.13 THE GENESIS AND GROWTH OF SHGs IN INDIA

The Self Help Group (SHG) in India has come a long way, since its inception in 1992. The spread of SHGs in India has been phenomenal. It has made dramatic progress from 500 groups in 1992 to some 16,18,456 groups that have taken loans from banks. About 24.25 million poor households have gained access to formal banking system through SHG-bank linkage programme and 90% of these groups are only women groups (NABARD, 2005).

The NABARD (2006) home page declares that more than 400 women join the SHG movement every hour and an NGO joins the Micro-Finance Programme every day. There are also agencies, which provide bulk funds to the system through NGOs. Thus, organizations engaged in micro finance activities in India may be categorized as Wholesalers, NGOs supporting, SHG Federations and NGOs directly retailing credit borrowers or groups of borrower.

The spread of the SHGs is highly concentrated in the southern part of the country with very few in the north and the east. Over half a million SHGs have been linked to banks over the years but a handful of States, mostly in South India, account for almost 60% of this figures (NABARD 2005). Since the advent of SHG in India, its growth rate has been very low in the states of Rajasthan, Bihar, Utter Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and union territory of Andaman Nicobar Islands where the status of women is still very backward and pathetic.
The SHGs have taken the form of a movement for women’s social development in India. In fact as a strategy for women’s development, they have arisen out of the perceived problem of women’s lack of access to resources at both the household and the village level. Women’s development has gone beyond the economic dimension and place emphasis on issues relating to equality, autonomy and self-reliance at the individual level and on solidarity of the community (of women) at the group level (Dube, 1998).

As a group-oriented model, SHGs in India is a mechanism for women’s development to bring in individual and collective empowerment through improvement in both ‘condition’ and ‘position’ of women. Women are organized as collectives towards the overall goal of achieving gender equality as well as sustainable, Comprehensive community development.

Unlike the self-help projects in Kenya, the SHGs in India are primarily micro-credit groups and the direct objective of micro-credit is to improve the ‘condition’ of women. Women in India are mobilized to protest against domestic violence, legal discrimination, rising prices, dowry, prohibition of liquor, rape, child marriage, female infanticide, sexual abuse, domestic violence, male alcoholism and so on. In dealing with women’s strategic interests, women participate in collective activities through SHGs to address these strategic needs. In the process, it aims to empower women with several forms of power.
1.14 ORGANIZATIONS FOR THE WOMEN AND BY THE WOMEN

There are many successful women forums and organizations that are trying to bring the rural women together for developmental works. The examples that we will take are Working Women's Forum (WWF), SEWA, Shri Mahila Griha Udyog Lijjat Papad, or Lijjat, and Mann Deshi Mahila Sah Bank Ltd., Mhaswad, Maharashtra.

The Working Women's Forum (WWF), established in Madras in 1978, has brought together over 13,000 poor urban women around the issue of credit. Most women who live in the slums of Madras work as small-scale traders and vendors, their earnings often providing over half the family income. Interviews with these women revealed that their primary concern was increasing their earning capacity. The WWF was set up to enable these women to obtain low interest loans to expand their businesses.

The key element in the WWF structure is the neighborhood loan group, comprised of 10-20 women from the same area who act as mutual guarantors for the loans of all group members. Over 7000 women have received loans and the repayment rate has been over 90%. About 2800 new jobs or businesses have been created, and earnings have increased an average of 50% in existing enterprises. Women report that they are eating better quality and more varied foods because of their increased income.

The WWF is expanding its activities to address the political and social problems of working women as well. The Forum operates day care centers, skills training centers, and remedial classes for schoolchildren. In
1980, the WWF launched a family planning program in which field workers (who are drawn from the WWF membership and paid $18 per month) disseminate information on health, nutrition, and family planning to families in their communities. According to a staff member, this program was an outcome of the realization that "income generation and large families do not go together."

The WWF also promotes inter caste, no dowry marriages and lobbies for public services. Women have become more confident of the possibility of gaining control over their lives, including their fertility. The WWF experience demonstrates that an organization does not need a lot of money, educated staff, or technical expertise to reach poor women. The Forum's success is attributed to its selection of one critical issue, utilization of local leadership, organization of women around existing neighborhood ties, and decentralized management.

The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) is an Ahmadabad-based union of women workers established in 1972. Backed by more than 220,000 association members and has set up 16 organizations, including the SEWA bank has organized to fight poverty through full employment and self-reliance, SEWA workers demand the right to work for food, income, and social security. Since its creation, SEWA has fought to gain the recognition of home-based and outside workers' legitimate rights.

However, it was realized during the course of such struggle that struggle alone could not fulfill the demands, needs, and priorities of workers. There was also a need to create alternative economic organizations of workers in terms of access to capital, markets, raw materials, and knowledge and
skills; building organizational and managerial capacities; upgrading skills through training; social security; and enabling policies. The joint action of union and cooperatives has therefore been SEWA's organizing strategy for all these decades.

Shri Mahila Griha Udyog Lijjat Papad, or Lijjat, 'is an organization that has acted as a catalyst in empowering poor urban women across India during the last four decades. Starting as a small group of seven women in 1959, today Lijjat has more than 40,000 members in 62 branches across 17 Indian states. Only women can become members of Lijjat, and all of its members, addressed as "sisters," own the organization.

Lijjat's main product is a thin, round, savory snack called papad, and papad rolling is the major activity of the "member sisters." Remuneration is the same for everyone, and profits and losses are shared equally among the member sisters, so there is no possibility of concentration of assets and wealth. LijJat refuses to accept donations, but instead provides donations to the needy. Besides papad, Lijjat has also introduced other products, such as Sasa detergent and soap. However, papad has remained as its core identity product. Key Factors for Success of Lijjat:

- The merging of ownership with membership has encouraged uniform and sustained organizational growth.
- The consistent quality of the product has been a primary factor in establishing and maintaining Lijjat's brand image in the market for the last four decades.
- The Sarvodaya philosophy proved vital in forming Lijjat's foundation.

- Lijjat has emerged as an innovative organization in which women from any religion, caste, or class can become members. The pledge and all-religion prayer also encourage cooperative work among women, irrespective of caste or religion.

- Transparency in operations and a nonhierarchical structure has helped in establishing organizational accountability among member sisters.

- Lijjat encourages its members to give to others whatever they can, instead of expecting help from others. Lijjat does not accept donations, but gives donations, which enhances members’ self-esteem and pride in their own organization.

- Calling the members "sisters" creates an informal work environment. Frequent meetings, open interaction, and consensual distribution of tasks reduce the possibility of disputes resulting from communication gaps and help work to go smoothly.

- Lijjat provides economic opportunities through a domestic activity. Once involved in this activity, the women acquire confidence and status as they make money in a respectable manner. The more enterprising, responsible, and experienced member sisters climb the administrative ladder. Lijjat exemplifies a remarkable way of making leaders out of ordinary women.
Mann Deshi Mahila Sah Bank Ltd., Mhaswad, Maharashtra, founded in 1997 is the first rural women financial institution which received a banking license from RBI where 100% of its clients were women having annual incomes averaging US$400. It is also the first bank in the country to have more than 2000 members from backward castes. The bank is having more than 47000 clients (2005 figure) ranging from street vendors to shepherds to wage earners to small entrepreneur women. The bank estimated that by 2008, it will reach 270000 clients. It has its integrated approach, which distinguishes it from other micro credit efforts. It Credit though very important is not adequate for sustained and substantial employment.

It is becoming increasingly clear that access to financial services alone is not enough for poor people to transfer their economic activities into profitable economic enterprises. Access to market, information, and technical knowhow and social support services are as important as money if the poor are to share in economic growth. If poor people are going to build incomes, assets and livelihood in substantial ways, they need access to:

- Market information and commercial linkages
- Health and social security services, such as insurance and pension
- Technology and method to improve productivity
- Representation at Gram-Panchayat level governing bodies
Equipment and supply knowledge, linkages and bargaining power

Women are not bankable because of the lack of assets in their name, and that perpetuates the cycle of poverty for them. And when a family acquires an asset, it is rarely put in the woman's name.

Thus, asset ownership is a priority for MDMSB. An asset right is fundamental in women's financial and social security. Each MDMSB loan program is designed to help women transfer family assets into her name. This includes making transfers in the woman's name for agricultural land and houses, and the acquisition of tools, shops and livestock, bank accounts, shares and savings certificates.

1.15 SHGs IN TAMIL NADU

The empowerment of women through SHGs has been initiated in Tamil Nadu as early as in 1998 in Dharmapuri District. The success of this had led to outcome of Mahalir Thittam (Plan for Women) was launched from 1997-98. In 1992, NABARD (National Bank for Agricultural and Rural Development) conducted a pilot project, as a partnership model between SHGs, Banks and NGOs and found that it was more successful and effective.

The vision of Tamil Nadu Women Development Corporation is “Empowerment of one million women in Tamil Nadu with special emphasis on the poorest and disadvantaged. Social empowerment, economic empowerment and capacity building are the mission of the Mahalir
Thittam. The Self Help Groups are supported by the below organizational structure:

The Tamil Nadu Corporation for Development of Women Ltd

\[\text{Tamil Nadu Corporation for Development of Women Ltd} \]

\[\text{Mahalir Thittam Project Management Unit} \]

\[\text{Project Implementation Units (District Level)} \]

\[\text{Non – Governmental Organizations} \]

\[\text{Self Help Groups} \]

The Tamil Nadu Corporation for Development of Women Ltd with its headquarters at Chennai is implementing the Mahalir Thittam Project. The main objective is to combine the wide reach and resources available to the state, with the commitment and quality work of the NGOs. It has a project management unit. The unit consists of Chairperson and Managing Director, Executive Director and General Manager. Each District has a Project Implantation Unit (PIU), which is headed by a Project Officer assisted by Assistant Project Officers in the various functional areas of training, and communication, monitoring, schemes, marketing, administration and credit. Co – ordination, monitoring the groups, conducting regular review meetings and organizing training programmers for NGOs and Bankers are the role of the Project Implementation Units.
STATUS OF SHGS IN TAMIL NADU (AS ON 31-03-2010)

- Total number of SHGs: 4,41,311
- Total number of SHGs Women Members: 69.91 Lakhs
- Total number of Rural SHGs: 3,02,092
- Total number of Rural SHGs Members: 48,33,472
- Total number of Urban SHGs: 21,57,894
- Total Savings: Rs.2,568 Crores
- Total number of SHGs Credit linked: 4,02,046
- Total number of SHGs 4.69 Lakhs as on 30 – 10 – 2010 with 70 Lakh Members

99% of SHGs Bank Loans are promptly repaid by the groups.

SHGs TOWARDS HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

The SHGs, as originally conceived, are not just groups that promote savings and credit, they are intended to become institutions that promote human development and empower their members. The major objectives of building participatory institutions of the poor such as:
- SHGs is to provide the members with an opportunity and the space to develop a vision / mission,

- To develop and maintain organizational and financial management systems,

- To grow in confidence and skills to manage their lives and promote their interests in the private and public domains,

- To establish the linkages required for an institution to function effectively and sustainably and to support its members to become agents of social change.

There is adequate evidence to substantiate the claim that in this process, the members of the SHGs build new relationships, which are more of gender and decision-making and more equitable in resource distributions, within the group, in the home and with other institutions and groups in society.

Institutions, by themselves, do not empower the poor unless they are participatory like the SHGs (in which all the members are united by a degree of homogeneity and affinity, all are involved in decision-making and in establishing the rules that govern their behaviour) and adequately provided with capacity-building support. In fact, institutions have the potential to be disempowering, if their structure is inappropriate and imposed from outside and their internal processes are hierarchical or elitist; in such cases they reflect and reinforce the existing class / caste / gender relations.
A major assumption on which the SHG strategy is based is that participatory institutions of the poor provide them with the space to develop skills and confidence and to mobilize resources. Good SHGs have been known to provide the impetus by which people can change the unfair power relations which have been keeping them both in poverty and suppression.

In a society, where gender, class and caste play a major role in supporting exclusively and extraction of surplus, it is not enough to teach people to fish, if they cannot reach the river. Then hurdles in the way have more to do with oppressive socio-economic relations and structures rather than with skills. Building people’s institutions, therefore, should be the primary objective of SHGs if they wish to transform themselves into civil society organizations. The most visible manifestations of success are financial. Attempts have also been made to assess the degree of empowerment of SHG members, though not as regularly and uniformly as financial information flows.

A majority of the SHG promoting institutions have not created reliable database or promoted record keeping and documentation systems that enable good quality data related to empowerment to be accessed, consolidated and analyzed. ‘Empowerment’ is such a misunderstood term that its meaning is trivialized to the extent that merely giving a small loan ends up being seen as gender empowerment.

Theoretically and ideally, SHGs, both of men and women, promote the following features which could have an impact on enhancing human development and empowerment:
- A habit of regular savings;

- Weekly meetings with a clear agenda and conducted in a participatory way, where decisions are taken by the groups to give loans to its members regarding the purpose, size and schedule of repayments;

- A culture of sanctions for willful default;

- Awareness of, and involvement in, credit plus issues related to equity, gender and rights including the creation of a culture that reduces violence in the home; periodically a participatory self-assessment; and

- A culture of learning.

Together these contribute to, and enhance, the management skills and the confidence of the SHG members while increasing their capacity to meet their livelihood needs.

1.16 IDEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE AND RESEARCH PROBLEM

Women across the world have, after the years of struggle, been able to achieve the right to get education, employment, property, franchise etc. Now, many more women educate and work in public sector than ever before and they make-up more than half of most electorates. This is not surprising and disturbing that despite all the qualities and capabilities women have positions in both public and private sectors.
Liberal feminists who seek equal rights with men in the male dominated world of paid employment have also been constrained to behave as surrogate males. Bureaucratic organization rests upon a gendered division of labour. Bureaucratic carrier rest upon full time, continuous employment – that is the male norm. According to liberal feminists, all women are capable of asserting their ability to achieve equality therefore it is possible for change to happen without altering the structure of the society.

Amartya Sen has said that the process of economic development can be seen as a process of expanding the capabilities of people. The ultimate objective of development should be the human development. And human values approach is the key factor for the healthy human organizations.

Socialist feminists see women as being held down as a result of their unequal standing in both the workplace and domestic sphere. According to them, women are exploited by patriarchal system which devalues women and the substantial work that they do. Patriarchy as an ideological construct interacts with capitalist process and in reinforces specific constraints on women physically as well as mentally which permeates the understanding that the women are principally housewife, mothers and subsidiary workers. This social construction of relations of power bases on sexual differences is extended to signify situations of inequitable power relations or dominants and or sub-ordinates. Therefore, socialist feminist focus their energies on broad change that affect the society as a whole rather than on an individual basis. They advocated both social upliftment and economic upliftment for gender oppression.
The recent evidence also suggest that the degree of inequality is not closely related to the level of income per head, as was once thought, but the factors dependent upon the strategy of development that is followed. These factors include the distribution of productive assets, the distribution of educational opportunities, the employment intensity of development path and the general policy stands of Government. It is possible therefore, for Government to perceive both distributive – equity objectives and growth objectives successfully. Similarly, Government has it within its power to promote the enhancement of human capabilities by means of educational, health, nutrition, participation and other policies.

Our Constitution in its fundamental rights has provisions for equality, social justice and protection of women. These goals are yet to be realized. Women continued to be discriminated, exploited and exposed to inequalities at various levels in all sectors – social, economic, political, educational, health care and legal. As women are oppressed in all spheres of life, they need to be empowered in all walks of life.

Women’s empowerment is a global issue and discussions on women’s rights are at the forefront of formal and informal campaigns worldwide. The concept of women’s empowerment appears to be the outcome of several important critics and debates generated by women’s movements throughout the world and particularly by Third World Feminist. It sources can be traced to the interaction between “feminism” under the concept of “popular education” developed in Latin America in the 1970s.

The most conspicuous features of the term empowerment is that it contain the word “power”. To side step philosophical debate it may be broadly
defined as control over material assets, intellectual resources and ideology. The process of challenging existing power relation and of gaining greater control over sources of power may be termed as empowerment. This broad definition is given by the feminist scholars and activist within the context of their own regions (Batliwala, 1995).

Empowerment in a simplest form means the manifestation of redistribution of power that challenges, patriarchal ideology and male dominance (Chandra, 1997). In short, empowerment is a process of awareness and capacity building leading to greater participation to greater decision – making power and control, and transformative action.

The empowerment of women covers both an individual and collective transformation. It’s strengthens their innate ability through acquiring knowledge, power and experience. This empowerment of women at the cross-roots level can be possible through the new concept of self help approach.

The empowerment of women through Self Help Groups would lead to benefits not only to the individual women and women groups but also for the family and community as a whole through collective action for development. These groups have a common perception of need and an impulse towards collective action. Empowering of women is not just for meeting their economic needs but also through more holistic social development.
In keeping this mind, the researcher has selected the topic entitled, “Role of Self Help Groups in the Empowerment of Women in Chennai City, Tamil Nadu” with the following aim and objectives.

1.17 AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main aim of the present study is to fact-found the level of role played by the Self Help Groups in the empowerment of women. Based on afore stated aim the following are profound as the objectives of the present study in the identified topography:

- To analyze the socio-economic status of women incumbent into Self Help Groups.
- To ascertain the organization and functioning of Self Help Groups.
- To assess the social empowerment of members of women Self Help Groups.
- To measure the economic empowerment of members of women Self Help Groups.
- To enquire into the problems faced by women in Self Help Groups.
- To find out the level of empowerment between Office Bearers and Members.
1.18 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

To-day, SHGs play a major role in poverty alleviation in India. A growing number of poor women in various parts of India are members of SHGs and actively engage in savings and credit as well as in other activities such as income generation, natural resource management, literacy, child care and nutrition. Almost all the major donor agencies support SHGs in India in one way or the other.

Many NGO's in India promoting the SHGs mechanism and liking it to various development interventions. There is ample evidence that SHG approach is very effective, efficient and relevant tool for organizing and empowering the poor and they have brought about several changes in the society. The impact of SHGs on social and economic empowerment of women is a probing area in the recent past. Though, there are plenty of studies on SHGs focused on rural areas with different perspectives none of them were about urban SHGs from Women's Studies perspective. Hence, it is decided to find out the role of SHGs in the empowerment of women in Chennai City from women's perspective.