CONCLUSION

Women play a vital role in a family and in turn to build up the society and the nation. Her very rights are being denied, refused and violated. Women are subjected to inequality, female infanticide, dowry death, rape, sexual harassment, domestic violence and many other forms of violence. According to Manu Dharma, women who, at all the stages of their life are protected by men are not fit for liberation. The caste system, which took firm roots in the medieval period aggravated the position of women in the Tamil society.

The patricidal nature of the society, which makes the women inferior in status, enforced seclusion, lack of education and early marriage were the factors that led to gender discrimination documented by early reformers in the country. The early reform movements sought legislation by the state to tackle these issues. The reform movement of later half of 19th century revolved around social issues such as sati and improving the conditions of widows. Rajaram Mohan Roy was the torch bearer of the women’s reform movement in India. It was Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar who started the agitation for the cause of widows which ended up with the enactment of the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856. These reforms led to women joining the reform movement by the end of 19th century. The women’s movement thus initiated was enlarged to cover such issues such as equality in all walks of life, including education, equal job opportunities, equal pay for equal work and property rights.

The introduction of British rule in the country and in the state accelerated the social reforms by bringing out changes in cultural, educational and political spheres. The social reform movements of the 19th and the early 20th centuries, the freedom movement and the reforms initiated in independent India changed the social fabric in
the country and in the state. The beginning of the twentieth century saw establishment of a number of women’s organizations exclusively for women’s cause. Important among them are Women’s Indian Association, the National Council of Women and the All India Women’s Conference. They played an active role from 1917 onwards in fighting for women’s issues. The Women’s Indian Association achieved the voting right for women in municipal and legislative bodies. Because of the women’s movement, the Government of India in 1916 allowed women to contest elections of the provincial legislatures. Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy of Madras Presidency has the distinction of becoming the first women legislator in India. As a result of the struggle of women for their suffrage, the Government of India by the Government of India Act, 1935 gave the right to vote for women with property and educational qualifications and to wives of men in military service. It also provided for reservation of 41 seats in the provincial legislatures for women. Yet the social reform in the matter of gender discrimination is not complete.

Women of all walks of life responded to the call of Gandhiji to participate in the Non-cooperation movement non-violent struggle for Swaraj. A number of women who later became icons such as Sarojini Naidu joined the Independence movement and underwent jail terms. In struggles like Flag Satyagraha and the agitation for the removal of the statue of Neill, women participated in large numbers. In the Civil Disobedience Movement, Individual Satyagraha and Quit India Movement the contribution of women is very substantial. Women Indian National Army under Netaji was headed by Lt. Col. Lakshmi Swaminathan. These pre-Independence women’s movements sowed the seeds of women’s empowerment.

In the Independent India, although the Constitution and other laws that were enacted provided protection to women and their rights, the patrilineal customary system
of inheritance, patrilocal system of marriage, the lack of knowledge of women of their legal rights and their over dependence on male siblings etc came on the way of their claiming their rightful place. Under nutrition is a persistent problem with the women in the state.

Madras University has the distinction of being the first University in the country to enrol women in the year 1876. After Independence the state saw exponential growth in the matter of women’s literacy. Free noon meal introduced by Kamaraj has seen more students in the schools. According to the 2001 census, Tamil Nadu had attained third position in the matter of female literacy.

Women in Tamil Nadu have so many occupational health problems, such as those women who work in *beedi*, lace and *agarbathi* industries are afflicted with so many ailments which are peculiar to their occupation. The women in the state have also lesser access to quality health care as compared to men, which needs improvement.

In India, in particular in Tamil Nadu, women in large numbers have come out against atrocities on women and against practices that degrade women such as female infanticide and female foeticide. Women participated in agitations in defence of their traditional control over crucial resources such as water, forests, and land, participated in mass literacy drives and other issues. They are also coming out in large numbers over ecological degradation, price rise or protests against police repression, etc. While there is growing participation of women in grassroot political movements, a lot requires to be done for a meaningful share of women in the formal political structure of the country.

Women’s participation in elections as voters is encouraging. The number of women as contestants is also increasing year after year. Growing money power and muscle power required to contest even the smallest of elections, intimidation and
violence a woman candidate has to face, combined with the traditional male domination are the factors that discourage women from participating in the democratic exercise of election and the consequent sharing of power. Narrow electoral considerations and the necessity of fielding a winning candidate, make most political parties field only a handful of women candidates. Whenever they are fielded, it is kinship and affinity factors that play a major role. Ordinarily the women relatives of politicians such as daughters and wives are promoted and supported to emerge as proxies and the real power after their elections is exercised by the relatives of such women. Although the number of elected women members has gone up, the awareness levels and participation of the women in decision-making processes have yet to make a substantive change. As a result, there is little discernible change to be observed in the local women leadership pattern.

Growingly, women who matter are also contesting elections and get elected as members of State Legislative Assemblies and the Parliament. Considering these factors and the present position that three important states/Union Territories in the country are ruled by very powerful women Chief Ministers who enjoy political support on their own is no mean achievement for women in this country/Tamil Nadu.

The Constitution of India provided a foundation for women to thrive for equality. It ensured equality and equal opportunity for women. The 73rd and 74th Amendments (1992) to the Indian Constitution are major breakthrough towards ensuring women’s equality and increased participation in political power structures. These amendments provided for reservation of one third of seats for women in panchayats and in municipal institutions. There is also a one-third reservation for women for posts of chairpersons of these local bodies. These amendments have initiated a much-awaited strategy of affirmative action for providing the structural
framework for women’s participation in political decision-making and provided an opportunity to women to be in the forefront and develop new grass-root level leadership. They have infused one million women into grassroots level democratic institutions. This has annihilated the historic mindset of the people which had been seeing women as mere sex objects and second class citizens.

Women’s participation in government services is an indicator of women achieving decision making power and participation in governance. Tamil Nadu is one of the fewer states that have provided reservation for women in government service. The employment of women in government as well as in local bodies in Tamil Nadu is quite encouraging and even better than developed countries. In the higher bureaucracy more women require to be selected.

Girl child is an unwelcome addition to most of the families. Throughout her life she has to face discrimination and indignity. Child marriage retarded the growth of a girl child as she has been denied education and was subjected to family responsibility at a very young age. *Devadasi* system and sati were a bane to Indian society. These practices manifested indignity showered upon women. Prostitution and trafficking in women which still continue are bringing women to bad reputation and indignity. The laws such as Suppression of Immoral Traffic in Women and Girls Act made to check these practices are not effective as these practices thrive as organized business/profession.

Violence against women such as female infanticide, female foeticide, rape, wife battering, eve-teasing, molestation, forced marriage, dowry-related harassment, sexual harassment in working places etc are thriving. The laws made for combating these practices are not effective as the response to the society to these types of crimes/evils is not of such dimension to discourage potential criminals from shunning these activities.
The domestic violence, which takes many forms and variations, has not reduced in spite of the efforts taken by the Government and other organizations. Presently sexual harassment is grossly under reported due to lack of protection given to women workers.

There is a need to prevent sexual harassment in workplaces as mandated by the Supreme Court. Although a number of legislations have been enacted at the national level, such crimes are not decreasing; rather there is an increasing trend in commission of such crimes. Good-intention laws against child labour, dowry and other social ills does conform this trend; those who want to practice these have rarely been deterred; and any positive development in these areas could hardly be attributed to these laws.

Female foeticide and infanticide, practiced in certain parts of Tamil Nadu reflect the patriarchal nature of Tamil Nadu society and its strong preference for male child, with women being given a low status. Thus, the strategy to combat female foeticide and infanticide must also address the larger issue of removal of patriarchal mindset and empowering women. It must take the nature of a social movement, involving community participation.

Hindu laws and customs have a preference for male children. They place women in adverse position, including in the matter of property rights such as succession. Mitakshara school of Hindu law does not recognize the property right of women. The fight against this discrimination by women’s associations brought changes in the Hindu Code, which conferred on women certain property rights. The Hindu Succession Act, 1956 thought brought about changes in the law of succession; it did not touch the concept of Joint Family, which denies women their right of succession of coparcenary property. While it is welcome that Tamil Nadu is one among the handful of states that granted right to women in coparcenary property, amendments to legislations on property rights are required to the effect that any will nullifying the
inheritance right of daughters or any document by which a woman surrenders her right in favour of her brothers, husband or in-laws is invalid. On the lines of the Maharashtra Government policy for women, legislation should be enacted to the effect that as soon as a marriage is solemnized, the wife becomes the joint owner of the properties and assets earned by the husband.

The trans-genders, who claim to be women, have to face a lot of discrimination and abuse in the society because of their blurred sexual identity. Because of the intervention of High Court of Madras and also the initiatives taken by the Government of Tamil Nadu, which included setting up of Aravani Welfare Board there is perceptible change in their position in the society.

A number of women in public life such as Muthulakshmi Reddy, Annie Besant, Margaret Cousins, Rukmini Devi Arundale, Rukmini Lakshmipathy, Ambujammal, Ammu Swaminathan, Soundaram Ramachandran, Sarojini Varadappan, and Jayalalitha contributed immensely for the cause of women upliftment and also contributed to the development of the society at large. A number of other women of Tamil Nadu also played very important roles in the Society.

The Self-help Groups (SHGs) have enabled a tremendous physical mobility among women in Tamil Nadu. They increased their bargaining capacities, self confidence, life skills in areas such as accounts keeping, money management, savings and credit, awareness about health, nutrition, immunization, education etc. They enabled households to reduce dependence on local moneylenders by providing resources through common fund, generated through regular savings and internal rotation. Another significant contribution of SHGs is that they have empowered women to rise against certain important social problems like alcoholism, domestic violence, abandonment, dowries and female infanticide and foeticide. Thus, the SHGs have
become instruments of women’s movement to fight against social practices that affected the position of women in the society and enhance women’s participation in social activities. The individual women hitherto considered credit unworthy, have been transformed into credit worthy, thus enhancing the prestige and position of women in the family and the society.

Reservation for women in Assembly and Parliament is a hanging fire for some time now. Positive discrimination is an important tool in the matter of women’s empowerment as has been proved in the case of election of representatives for panchayats and municipal bodies. Historically it could be concluded that women would participate in decision making in numbers significant enough to make a difference if only there is a preference to them by way of reservation. Therefore, it is necessary that Parliament passes the Women Reservation Bill at the earliest. The state’s 30 per cent reservation policy for women should be given statutory protection by enactment of appropriate law. Such preferential treatment for women needs to be extended to areas such as promotions. Gender-based allocation of jobs in some departments such as all health inspectors being men need to be done away with.

Constitution of India, which was adopted and brought in to force in 1950 has a number of provisions to protect equality and to provide equal opportunity to women. Important among them are Article 15 which prohibits discriminations on various grounds including sex and also enables the state for making special provisions for women and children, Article 16 which guarantees equal opportunity in the matter of public employment, Article 42, which directs the state to make provisions for securing just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief, Article 243 D, which provides reservation of seats for women in panchayats and Article 243T, that provides for reservation of seats for women in municipalities. Specific laws have been enacted to
protect women from evil social practices, to protect women from violence, to ensure
dignity and equality of women, to protect the property right of women and fair
adoption, to protect the women in respect of marriages and to aim at affirmative action
for women.

Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956 prohibits traffic in human beings. There
is a need to check abuse of the Act in which Police men charge innocent women as
prostitutes. The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, an Act enacted with the intention of
penalising dowry giving and taking is a typical example wherein the intention of
enactment of the law has been nullified due to absence of social acceptability to the
Act. There exists a need to find out ways and means to effectively implement this Act.

In spite of enactment of the Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987, there is
a tendency in the society to glorify sati in certain parts of the country. Although the
State of Tamil Nadu has been very alert in such matters in the past, such alertness needs
to be maintained in future so that a practice that perpetrated the indignity of women for
centuries, which could be abolished because of the social movement initiated by
Rajaram Mohan Roy does not show its ugly head again.

A number of sections of the Indian Penal Code address the issue of cruelty and
violence to women. Certain specific Acts such as the Protection of Women from
Domestic Violence Act, 2005 have been enacted to take care of certain peculiar crimes
against women. In spite of existence of such laws, violence against women is
increasing day by day. The necessity to implement the said provisions/law in an
effective manner is crucial for bringing down crimes against women.

Misuse of tests on pre-natal sex determination still continues to thrive in spite of
the existence of the Pre-natal Diagnostic Technique (Regulation and Prevention of
Misuse) Act, 1994. There is a tremendous pressure on women of certain sections of society to abort girl child before birth. In order to check such tendencies which are detrimental to the dignity of women, the above Act needs to be implemented in its true spirit.

Certain safeguards to women provided under the procedural laws such as the prohibition on asking a woman to come to a police station for investigation etc are not followed by the police. Such safeguards have been provided to protect the dignity of women. The police must be sensitized to follow these provisions of law scrupulously.

Enactment of the Special Marriages Act, 1954, which provided an alternative arrangement to the people of all the religions and provided effective measures such as consensual divorce is a radical step taken for the betterment of the society. The Hindu Marriages Act, 1955, which brought many changes in the personal law of Hindus is a watershed so far as women’s movement is concerned. It abolished certain social practices prevailing in the Hindu society which were against the interest of women such as polygamy and introduced new concepts such as judicial separation in cases where the marriage did not work. Declaration of a marriage as null and void, registration of marriages, custody of children, legitimization of the illegitimate child, disposal of property are some of the new principles introduced by the Act.

The Family Courts Act which introduced the concept of the establishment of family courts to deal with matters pertaining to family and promotion of conciliation in marriage disputes has certain shortcomings such as absence of right to be represented by a legal practitioner, lack of jurisdiction of the family courts to deal with certain other matters pertaining to family such as testamentary (wills) matters, absence of investigative powers to the family courts to ascertain income and assets before passing
orders on maintenance etc., which need to be rectified. The procedure to be followed by
the family courts needs simplification.

Adoption laws are not uniform between various religious groups. There is a need to
simplify adoption law and to have a uniform adoption law.

Certain laws enacted in respect of the organized sector such as Factories Act,
Maternity Relief Act, Plantation Labour Act etc contain a number of provisions that
take care of protecting the dignity of women workers. There is a need to extend such
provisions to the women who are employed in the unorganized sector such as beedi and
match industry.

Government of India and the Government of Tamil Nadu have taken a number
of steps other than the legal measures explained in the previous paragraphs for the
upliftment of women, in particular women of weaker sections. The Tamil Nadu
government has announced Vision 2000, a set of forward looking strategies for the
empowerment of women. Tamil Nadu Government has a number of projects for the
upliftment of women, namely, The Tamil Nadu Women’s Development Project (TAWDP),
Entrepreneur Development Programme for women, Pudhu Vaazhvu Project, 'Cradle Babies' scheme, Jayalalitha Protection Scheme for the Girl Child,
Integrated Sanitary Complex for Women, Moovalur Ramamirtham Ammaiayar Ninaivu
Thirumana Nidhi Uthavi Thittam, E.V.R. Manimmaiayar Memorial Widow Daughter’s
Marriage Assistance Scheme, Anmaiya Teresa Orphan Girls Marriage Assistance Scheme,
Dr. Dharmambal Ammaiayar Ninaivu remarriage Scheme, Anjugam Ammaiayar Ninaivu
Kalappu Thirumana Nidhi Udhai Thittam (Now renamed as Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy
Ninaivu Kalappu Thirumana Nidhi Udhai Thittam), Sathiavani Muthu Ammaiayar
Memorial Free Supply of Sewing Machine Assistance Scheme, Sivagami Ammaiayar
Ninaivu Girl Child Protection Scheme, National Maternity Benefit Scheme (Dr.
Muthulakshmi Reddy *Ninaivu Mahapperu Nithi Udhavi Thittam*), Scheme for free supply of books for the children of poor widows, Special Incentive Scheme for encouraging girl education, Scheme for Creches for children of working and ailing mothers in Tamil Nadu through Social Welfare Board, National Programme for Education of Girls at elementary level (NPEGEL), Free Bicycles Scheme, Working Women’s Hostel, Scheme for Free Gas Connection To The Newly Married Couples who are below poverty line etc. These schemes have improved the status of women in the society.

The situation of *Dalit* women in the State of Tamil Nadu is very pathetic. They face the triple burden of caste, class and gender. They are also subjected to sexual abuse and other forms of violence by landlords and the police. The tireless work of the women's movement and the *Dalit* women’s movement, and the initiatives taken by both the Central and State Governments are the factors which help them in their upliftment. Living a dignified life with some semblance of equality for them is a distant dream for which a lot remain to be done.

One area in which women need training is how to sensitize them about what are leadership qualities and how to acquire them. Many NGOs and Women’s groups have provided training to women on acquiring leadership qualities. Concerted efforts are required to facilitate the process of women’s entry into key positions in political institutions. It is essential that the women’s movement recognise the importance of women as a constituency and ensure their participation and representation in policy formulation. The movement must provide a support system for women who enter political processes to win elections. Since a number of NGOs are working in the area of gender rights and gender sensitization, training programmes should be organized on
human right laws for women networks and community based organizations such as women’s SHGs.

The women’s movement has been a powerful agent of empowerment of women and strives for fundamental structural changes. The movement has provided a forum for focussing on women’s issues and mobilised them around these issues. The women’s self help groups and women activists thus aim to bring about a change in the women’s perceptions. The state facilitates empowerment of women through strengthening of women’s groups working at the grassroot level which are scattered and have no infrastructural facilities by networking and providing them funds that could bring them together to fight their common cause. They need to adopt a common strategy, powered by a common vision to bring about changes in the policies and structures that perpetuate their subordination in the society.

The condition of women seems particularly poor in four backward districts of Dharmapuri, Cuddalore, Villupuram and Tiruvannamalai. The gender policy of the State of Tamil Nadu for achieving equality for women needs to be drawn up. Such a policy, among other things, should focus on ensuring parity in wages for women, opening up non-farm sectors for women, equal availability of health and education to women, gender-specific issues of vulnerable groups to be highlighted and a blueprint for effective prevention of crimes against women drawn. Any gender policy should invariably involve women as stakeholders.

The women’s movement in the state should continue to persuade the state to take the lead in understanding the constraints faced by women so that women get their share in all spheres of state activity, which will lead to greater participation by women in public life. The social construction of gender which is very strong in India and in Tamil Nadu needs restructuring. The constraints such as social conditioning, patriarchal
mindset, lower status of girls and women in the families of birth as well as in the families into which they are married off, burden of unpaid household work, child care, gender blind places of work etc need to be addressed effectively. Access to education and in particular higher education which facilitates equitable employment opportunities for women needs to be improved. Women’s upliftment is closely related to education. All their subordination, social humiliation etc arose because the women were illiterate. Now, with education they feel free and the society treats them with all respect and dignity. Armed with education they will be in a much better position to protect themselves from all types of social tyranny. It is education and education alone that can bring women out of the social slavery and savagery to which they have been subjected to for centuries.

The society needs to be sensitized to take care of women’s aspirations and needs. Since child rearing adversely affects women’s participation in public activities providing quality child care services and crèches are important for the development of women. State should increase the number of such child care facilities. State should also be persuaded to provide working women’s hostels that provide security and safety to women who are in employment or who otherwise need such facilities to protect them from criminals and to escape from social prejudices. Working women’s hostels are already operating in major districts in Tamil Nadu. Need for additional working women’s hostels should be assessed in an objective and realistic manner and provided by the Government. Overall, women in Tamil Nadu are educated and politically sensitized and are seeking newer public roles.

It is the women’s movement in Tamil Nadu that created political awakening in Tamil women. The role played by national leaders and certain non-women’s movement like the Self-Respect Movement of Periyar need a special mention for their role in
achieving equality in opportunities and enactment of laws that protected women’s rights and dignity.

While growingly women are employed in higher percentages in all the sectors, it is necessary to ensure that each police station has adequate female police personnel, consistent with recommendations made by the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Women police should record complaints submitted by women. It is to be ensured that investigations of complaints of violence against women include women investigators. Criminal Procedure Code needs to be amended so that rape victims are not restricted to approaching government hospitals for medical examinations and can instead be examined by any registered practitioner for the purposes of gathering evidence.

As highlighted in the TN Human Development Report, while the absolute condition of women in Tamil Nadu is better than that in most states, the position of women vis-à-vis men with respect to literacy, education, work force participation, wages, property ownership and political participation has not improved to the desired level.

Men and women are equal in constitution but in practical life they are subordinates. Biologically women have higher life expectancy when compared to men. The sex ratio actually is in favour of women. The declining has serious consequences for women, men and society in general. Women are ill-treated everywhere. Removing the wrong perception of people that girls are liabilities, encouraging female education, removal of poverty, enhancing the self worth of women are the major and immediate actions required.