

Winds *of* Change

**Empowering Panchayat Elected
Women Members and the Community**

Lata Ramaseshan

Rural Women's Social Education Centre (RUWSEC)

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About RUWSEC

Rural Women's Social Education Centre (RUWSEC) is a grassroots women's organization that operates from Chengalpattu, near Chennai. RUWSEC was founded in 1981 by a team of 13 women, 12 of whom were from the local villages and had previously worked as literacy teachers with the National Adult Education Programme.

RUWSEC works primarily with socially and economically lower population groups in the villages within Thirupporur and Tirukazhukundram blocks of Chengalpattu sub-district of Kanchipuram district. In 1999, RUWSEC's community-based activities includes 98 villages with a total population of about 30,000. The outreach programme through RUWSEC's other activities extends to a population of 50,000. Ninety percent of the population belongs to Scheduled Castes (SCs), and 10 percent to Other Backward Castes (OBCs).

Health care and RUWSEC

RUWSEC's primary mission and purpose has been to focus on women as the main torchbearers of health development in the communities. Women most often, are, the single source health providers in every family establishment and therefore it is women who emerge as important and prime participants in carrying forward health related activities in the communities. This mission has grown outwards into embracing the concept of women's well being through women's empowerment. As a result, RUWSEC has experimented and successfully implemented a number of very relevant and exciting programmes that have visibly changed the social fabric of societies where RUWSEC is operating.

The organization carries out a range of activities, which include:

- Community-based action for health promotion through a community health worker, formation of a local women's "*sangham*" (association) and leadership training for village women
- Publication and distribution of popular education material on health
- Education and empowerment programmes for adolescents
- Work with men for gender sensitization and on reproductive health issues
- Community-based interventions for prevention of gender violence against women
- Health education and training for other NGOs and annual health festivals
- Creating an information base on the health of rural poor women.
- Action/research projects on specific health problems/interventions reproductive health services through a clinic

RUWSEC has also consciously tried to lobby with the executive arm of the administration, the government officials, in a spirit of cooperation and enterprise. It has acted as a bridge between the communities and the government on any number of occasions by mobilizing women's participation and through them, lobbying for better access to health care and needs of the villages. In the NGO Public Sector collaboration, RUWSEC has carried out gender training for men, training for dais, training women ward members from Panchayats, and undertaking active advocacy of health with the government and district administration.

This document details the NGO public sector collaboration in the empowerment of women ward members of the Panchayat who, through a continuous two year training course, became change agents at the individual level as also at the societal level at large.

International Conference on Population and Development at Cairo

The origins of the training programme for the Panchayat women ward members may be traced to the objectives elaborated in the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), which met in Cairo, Egypt, from 5-13 September 1994. Although the issue of abortion proved to receive most of the media attention, Conference participants also addressed a number of important, and often controversial, issues including immigration policy, reproductive health and reproductive rights, the empowerment of women, urbanization and access to healthcare.

On the issue of health and reproductive rights, the programme called for a major paradigm shift in the manner in which population programmes were conceived and implemented. ICPD underlined the urgent need and instant shift of population development programmes from merely being driven by demographic targets to being oriented towards upholding women's reproductive rights and ensuring better reproductive health for women of all ages. This meant that countries had to offer a wider package of services not only to mothers and mothers to be but also to all women, to improve the technical quality of services and to be more client-focused.

ICPD also emphasized on the need for a sustained economic growth in the context of sustainable development; education, especially for girls; gender equity and equality; infant, child and maternal mortality reduction; and provision of universal access to reproductive health services, including family planning and sexual health.

Excerpts from the ICPD deliberations:

Reproductive health care and reproductive rights:

“ Reproductive health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity, in all matters relating to the reproductive system and to its functions and processes. Reproductive health therefore implies that people are able to have a satisfying and safe sex life and that they have the capability to reproduce and the freedom to decide if, when and how often to do so. Implicit in this last condition are the right of men and women to be informed and to have access to safe, effective, affordable and acceptable methods of family planning of their choice, as well as other methods of their choice for regulation of fertility which are not against the law, and the right of access to appropriate health-care services that will enable women to go safely through pregnancy and childbirth and provide couples with the best chance of having a healthy infant.”

Empowerment of Women: “to achieve equality and equity based on a harmonious partnership between men and women and enable women to realize their full potential; to ensure the enhancement of women's contributions to sustainable development through their full involvement in policy- and decision-making; and to ensure that all women are provided with the education necessary for them to meet their basic human needs and to exercise their human rights. All countries are urged to ensure the widest and earliest possible access by girls and women in fulfilling the goal of universal primary education before the year 2015.”

Collaboration between NGOs and the public sector has been widely identified as an important strategy towards implementing the commitments made in Cairo, including by the government of India. The technical expertise of the public health sector combined with NGOs’ insights into the health needs of poor women as well as barriers to their accessing health services could go a long way towards making services gender sensitive and client-oriented.

In an effort to bring the NGO, the public enterprise and the community closer towards narrowing gender inequalities in the field of health and thereby working towards universal sustainable development, RUWSEC embarked on the policy of training Panchayat women members towards a participation process which would involve the community, the NGO and the district officials in issues such as health and health care needs.

The role of Panchayat in civil society

Panchayati Raj is a three tier system comprising of a Gram Panchayat at the village level, Panchayati Samiti at the Block level and a Zilla Parishad at the district level, of local self government promoting direct and participatory democracy at the grass roots. The Panchayat Raj has its origins in Article 40 of the Directive Principles in the Constitution of India:

“**Article 40:** The state shall take steps to organize village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government”.

Though the Panchayat Raj system was functioning in some states, it was found that it was not an effective instrument of self-government at the village and district levels, without statutory recognition and powers.

Subsequently, in June 1991, a more dynamic version of the Panchayat Raj Bill and a resolution for the amendment of the Constitution were introduced in Parliament in September 1991 and the Act came into force on 24th April 1993. The objectives of the Constitution Amendment were

- To provide constitutional status to Panchayati Raj system
- To facilitate decentralization of political and economic power
- To provide opportunities for power sharing to those who have been deprived of such opportunities for centuries namely Dalits, Tribals, Women and Weaker Sections
- To make people themselves responsible for their development

The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment

Under the 73rd amendment, all States are to establish a three-tier of Panchayats — at village, block and district levels, with regular elections taking place every five years. The Act provides proportionate reservation of seats for scheduled castes/tribes, reservation of not less than one-third seats for women. The amendment also called for meeting of Gram Sabhas four times a year and devolution of 29 subjects listed in the 11th schedule of the Constitution. These subjects include agriculture, minor irrigation, small-scale industries, rural housing, adult education, roads and other means of communication, cultural activities, health and sanitation, social welfare and public distribution system. The Panchayats can make laws concerning economic and social development of villages under the above-mentioned 29 subjects. The State Finance Commission would also recommend the distribution of net proceeds of taxes between the states and the Panchayats and grants-in-aid.

The new Panchayat Raj system came into being in Tamil Nadu in 1994, with the enactment of the Tamil Nadu Panchayat Act. But elections to the local bodies were held

only in 1996. After the 73rd constitutional amendment, the Panchayat has undergone a drastic change. It is a revolutionary step from shifting the political process of state regulated activities to people initiated action. Under this scheme, the state is only a facilitator and people are no mere passive beneficiaries but responsible programme implementers.

Currently, there are 12619 Village Panchayats with 41,086 wards, 385 Panchayat Unions having 6,499 wards and 29 district Panchayats with 648 wards. The percentage of rural population is 69% i.e. about 3.6 crore people live in the rural areas.

Initializing the process: How it all began

A brief note on RUWSEC activities is required to understand how the process of empowering women in their political participation commenced. Planning for the programme began in early 1997, after the Panchayat elections for the state was completed. Reservations had been extended for women and therefore a number of women had become ward members. What was also of import was that a number of Scheduled Caste and OBC women members had also become Panchayat Ward members.

It was decided that health and health care needs would be the central issue around which training would need to be developed. Initial contact with the women Panchayat members was required to elicit their response to such a programme. This was to strengthen the weak health linkages between the administrative wing and the communities through the people representatives and successfully lobby for better health to the communities. In this way, the overall strategy of implementing the NGO public sector collaboration in the area of health would also be made to fructify into a concrete programme.

A core group was formed and one of the members was assigned with the task of acquiring the list of women members who had successfully won the elections from the Block Development Office. The list was to be accessed from Thirupporur and Thirukazhukundram Taluks, the two areas, where RUWSEC is directly involved in grassroots activism. However, the BDO's office was not willing to share the list of women ward members. Reasons varied from non-availability of a comprehensive list of ward and Panchayat members to the typical bureaucratic response of unwillingness to share such information. However what was gleaned from the numerous visits to the Taluks was that there are 55 Panchayat Unions in Thirupporur and 50 Panchayat unions in Thirukazhikundrum. After a sustained and patient campaign to get more information from the taluk offices, it was revealed that there are 386 villages in Thirukazhikundrum and 397 villages in Thirupporur blocks. The office did not even share with the RUWSEC member, the names of the villages that came under the administrative blocks of Thirupporur and Thirukazhukundram.

Panchayat Information

Total number of Panchayat Unions in two taluks	105
Of which	
Thirupporur	55
Thirukazhukundram	50
Total number of villages under Panchayat unions	783
Of which	
Thirupporur	397
Thirukazhukundrum	386

A preliminary investigation among woman ward members

The initial meetings with the Block Development Office did not in any way help in eliciting real time information about the Panchayat ward members. The core group then decided to gather information from the 94 villages where RUWSEC is actively involved in community based activities.

RUWSEC's activities are concentrated in 94 villages in the Tirupporur, and Thirukkazhukundram Taluks of Kanchipuram District in Tamil Nadu of which 40 villages are in Tirupporur and 54 villages in Thirukazhukundram.

RUWSEC members undertook a thorough scanning of the villages where RUWSEC has been directly involved. Preliminary investigation revealed that there were 86 women ward members in the 94 villages under RUWSEC purview. All the women were asked if they would be interested in a programme conducted by RUWSEC. Responses were also elicited as to the purpose of their standing for Panchayat elections. 48 women said that they would be interested in such a programme.

Woman ward members from villages where RUWSEC currently works	
Total number of RUWSEC villages in Kanchipuram	94
Of which	
Tirupporur Block	40
Thirukazhikundram Block	54
Panchayat Participation by Women	
Number of women ward members who had won in the 1996 Panchayat Elections	86
Of which	
Literate members	70
Members attached to political parties, Husband's/father's personal influence	78
Women who were elected on a unanimous vote	20
Women ward members who came for training	
Number of women who opted for training	48
Number of women who came for training sessions till Its completion	42
Of which	
Members belonging to 11 village Panchayats	
From Thiruporur block	19
Members belonging to 15 village Panchayats from Thirukkazhukundrum block	23

After the initial distillation process, a combination of informal interviews and a semi structured questionnaire survey format were conducted with the 48 women members who had agreed to come for the programme with its accent on community health and health needs. The observation study on the Panchayat wards members was conducted during the months of September and October 1997.

Demographic details in terms of name, husband's name, caste, age, number of the ward, the villages under the Panchayat they represent, marriage, children, were sought from the members. Also, details regarding elections, reasons for standing in the elections, their status before elections, what they wanted to do for women, what were the changes they wanted to bring in the villages were some of the leading questions that were asked of the women Panchayat members. Sadly the answers that were received did not seem to reflect a positive role modelling about the women themselves. The responses revealed that the women ward members were unsure of the exact nature of their political standing, the administrative unit that they are they were responsible for and above all a lack of self assertion and self confidence among the women themselves. The interviews also revealed that most of the women were not in a position to explain the problems and the aspirations of the community and the general economic conditions of the villages.

Profile of the women ward members

- All the 48 ward members did not know the number of villages that came under their wards or administrative units.
 - A majority of the women who belonged to the Scheduled Caste did not seem to be literate
 - 13 women ward members did not answer the questions, instead their husbands actively participated in the discussion
 - Almost all the members were not in a position to respond confidently to all the questions raised.
 - However 8 members did not know anything about their villages at all.
 - The homes of the most of the women ward members had thatched roofs, except for five of them, which had pucca roofings.
 - Two women ward members had stood against men and had successfully won the elections.
 - The majority had participated in the elections on the insistence of either the husband or the local political leader.
 - The response for reasons for standing for Panchayat elections was extremely muted. Most said they had to either ask their leaders or their husbands for the answers.
 - They did not have any political or outside experience.
 - For the women, Panchayat meant “contracts” or “making money out of various Panchayat jobs”
 - Ward members spoke of pressure and opportunistic politicking by political parties as a major barrier to active women participation in the political process.
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Genesis of training for Panchayat elected women members

The core group then went back to the drawing board to conceptualize the training programme for the Panchayat members. The planning process had envisaged the programme as one part of an intervention strategy to improve quality of health care, by training Panchayat women to enforce accountability and thereby better access to quality health care for the communities. However, the preliminary analysis of the profile of the women ward members in the areas where RUWSEC was operating unraveled a telling commentary on the status of the Panchayat women ward members themselves. Discussions among RUWSEC staff who had undertaken the study revealed that quality of care in the Public Health Centres could not be the only component in the training curriculum. The women ward members needed intense self-confidence and leadership training to understand the organized health care structures and question the poor health care delivery system. Members decided that comprehensive leadership training would not only provide them with a good understanding of health and gender issues as also the functioning of the PHCs, but also create a greater psycho-sociological edge in developing their personal skills in analysis and understanding of social and gender issues.

It is also very interesting to note that after the first meeting with the ward members, a very revealing and important social benefit was sought by the members. The members asked if literacy programmes were included in the training sessions. The literacy programme was built into the module to empower and make the Panchayat women ward members' effective leaders in society.

Detailed Planning and constitution of the Panchayat programme

A core group consisting of one coordinator and two assistant coordinators was formed to firm up the Panchayat training programme. The core group of RUWSEC involved in the training programme built the nucleus of training around five major areas of development. These were roughly divided as follows:

- 1) Interpersonal skills/relationship communication skills
- 2) Study/thinking and other work related skills
- 3) Gender analysis
- 4) Societal analysis starting with information about day to day events and issues, political tasks
- 5) Practical information needed to function as effective Panchayat members

The modules at some of the sessions overlapped each other, because of the multi disciplinary and multi dimensional nature of the programme. The programme structuring was unique in that almost all the major components of the modules such as gender training, leadership and communication skills, women's participation in health activities are individual programmes in themselves. These were concurrently run to equip the women ward members with effective qualities to address and participate in the social re-engineering process. The dynamics of the programme was also tailored to help the

women ward members cope with the demands and the inherent anxieties of not being able to fully comprehend the workings of the Panchayat system. The group felt that training sessions had to include improving the self worth and self-confidence of women members who had voluntarily come forward to take part in the Panchayat training programme. The ward members had to have the ability to analyze, consider and come to their own conclusion on various issues. They also felt the ward members had to be made to realize the inherent patriarchal codes and superimposed social codes on them by men and society in general. There was also an urgent need to generate awareness on the immediate social issues as also issues of national importance.

The group decided that a one-day planning meeting by the core group and a two-day women ward members training programme could be held every month for the whole project. The one-day meeting would be held two weeks before the training programme. During the training programme all the five information areas elaborated would be taken.

The group also decided that the sessions would build in a high content of interactive features such as games and other audio-visual teaching aids besides role modeling and preparatory lessons. The group also decided that each session would begin with an interactive feature and end with another one.

It is interesting to note that interactive sessions were used in a very creative way to impart training. For one the innovative training method created a sustained level of interest among the members. And two, because of the low levels of literacy and comprehension of the group, the interactive features helped in communicating complex ideas and theoretical information in a simple and cohesive manner. Moreover this kind of training motivated the ward members to attend the programme till its completion. Thus during the whole course, more than 200 such games were evolved and created for the programme. Novel methods, such as skits, quiz contests, debates, dumb charades were also woven into the programme for easy and facile communication for a group which was not able to understand the higher theoretical aspects of local self government and gender inequalities. Thus, some of the interesting facets of the programmes were games in areas such as group participation, leadership, self-awareness, etc.

Every month, feedback was elicited on the assessment of the programme on each of the sessions on the ward members in terms of training schedules and the factors that were not liked or comprehended by them. A number of pebbles were distributed to the participants. Four columns and two rows were drawn on the ground thus:

Morning session	Very good	Good	Fair
Evening session	Very good	Good	Fair

All the participants were given small pebbles for the assessment process. The trainers would go out of the room, and the participants would hold a discussion and assign a rating to the session; four stones for very good, three stones for good and two stones for fair. They would have to place it on the column row and leave the room. In this way each

session was tailored to bring out the best of the trainers and also modify the programmes to the needs of the participants.

Objectives of the training programme

The group then drew up the primary objectives of the programme under which the women ward members would be trained

- Empower the women Panchayat members by centralizing the gender module by highlighting their respective rights and opportunities
- Examine in detail the unequal gender relationship and cultural inequities that exist in our every day lives
- Usher in a greater understanding of the socio psychological processes that women undergo and through the process impact a change in the patriarchal society and family structures
- Evolve key issues on the issue of gender and health through the process of identification of diseases and the respective curative treatment for specific diseases and overall improve the quality of health
- Emphasize the right to improve and develop health related aspects in village communities
- Dialogue on close coordination and joint implementation with the Government Primary Health Centres in reduction of female and maternal mortality and reduction in Infant Mortality cases
- Prioritise Reproductive Health as a change agent for better standards in living for the women and the communities

Horizontal and Vertical Modules/Structures of the Panchayat Programme

The objectives of the programme were built into the detailed modules of the five specific areas for which training was undertaken. The programme structure envisaged a holistic self development of the women ward members as also necessary skills required for the ward members to function as effective political members in society. A cursory view of the modules of the training programme:

Interpersonal relationship and communication skills

- 1) Overcoming shyness, making initial contact and keeping up a conversation
- 2) Listening skills
- 3) Learning skills, articulating one's thoughts and ideas, speaking precisely and clearly, public speaking
- 4) Working/participating in groups and teams (gender dimensions)
- 5) Assertive ness (gender dimension)

- 6) Expressing feelings, both positive and negative, appropriately appreciation, anger, criticism etc
- 7) Clarifying personal values
- 8) Ability to own one's thoughts, feelings, and actions in relationships
- 9) Managing conflicts and tensions (gender dimensions)
- 10) Negotiating

Examples of some of the group activity in the form of games and role-play that were conducted during the sessions on Interpersonal skills:

- 1) *Four members in the group are paired into two groups. Two of them from each of the group are told that each will have to carry a message to her group member. One member is asked to deliver it over phone and the other is asked to deliver it in person. Two ends of matchbox strung on a long thread serve as a phone. The message is passed on to the members who will have it to deliver to their team member. The rest of the group will have to assess as to how the message was delivered, was it precise or was it too long winded? Did the message get diluted or was there accurate communication of the message? The receiver of the message is asked if the message was properly delivered. The session then highlights on the essence of good communication and listening skills, and speaking precisely and clearly.*
- 2) *A pyramidal/conical structure of six steps is drawn on the ground and marked from number 1 to 6. Participants are asked to gather at the base of the structure at number 6 position. Music is played and the music is stopped participants are asked to move to the next step at number 5. If they move out of the structure then they do not play in the game anymore. The game goes on till the participants reach the top of the pyramid at number 1. After the end of the game, those who have reached the number 1 position are asked how they reached this stage when the others fell out of the game. Questions are also posed to those participants who could not make it to the top of the pyramid. The session then deals with aspects like self-confidence, leadership and assertiveness.*

Module II Study/thinking skills

- 1) Gathering information
- 2) Critical thinking/analysis/understanding logical reasoning and arguments
- 3) Creative thinking
- 4) Decision making
- 5) Managing and solving problems
- 6) Planning and running meetings
- 7) Reiterate public speaking and working with, managing teams
- 8) Managing time effectively
- 9) Setting work related goals
- 10) Planning to achieve goals; realistically appraising possibilities; assessing one's abilities and skills and setting time bound targets

Example of a game on improving creative skills:

- 1) *The game revolves around “kolam”, traditional symbols and patterns that are drawn on the ground in front of most homes in South India. The kolam generally consists of geometric patterns or floral drawings or pattern drawn out of dots. It is women who draw the kolam in front of their houses. In the game the women are paired off and each group is asked to draw the best creative kolam that they can think of. They are then given a set of six dots and asked to draw a creative pattern out of it. The game is then linked to creative thinking and how “out of the box” thinking delivers realistic and simple solutions to complex problems.*

Module III Gender analysis

- 1) Women’s status in the present social system triple oppression (caste, class and gender)
- 2) Sharing experiences as women and our feelings about ourselves; our bodies, our selves, our lives
- 3) Major issues of gender equity; access to and control over resources within the household; well being; employment and work; reproductive rights including freedom from violence
- 4) Women organizing; lessons from women’s movements around the world
- 5) What kind of a society do we want to build? social organizations; equity by caste/gender etc

Elaboration of some Interactive modules used during the session:

- 1) *All participants are given two cardboard clocks each, which depicts 12 hours of a day starting from the time one gets up to the time one goes to sleep. On one of the cardboard clocks, each participant is asked to mark the number of hours/time that a woman works and the number of hours/time that a woman pursues her leisure activities or takes rest. On the other cardboard clock, each participant is asked to log on the number of hours/time that the male member, (husband, brother or father) works and the number of hours that he pursues his leisure activities. The cardboard clocks pertaining to activities of women are grouped together while the cardboard clocks pertaining to the men are grouped together. On a blackboard, the number of hours is aggregated into four columns. Work hours of the women, leisure hours of the women, work hours for the man, leisure hours for the man. These are then represented in the form of pie chart, which depicts the actual number of hours that a woman works as more than that of a man. The group is then sensitized on women and work and discussion are held on the role of women related work in the socio-economic structures of our societies. The*

group is made aware that women do not attach much importance to their own work, and when asked what they do, they reply “Oh nothing at all”.

- 2) *All the participants are given a set of press advertisements and asked to debate on the role of the woman represented in the advertisement. The group is guided in terms of the status of the woman in the advertisement, the necessity and the need of the presence of the woman in the advertisement. The women are then divided into four groups and each group is given a product category for them to create an advertisement. This is followed by a role-play of sorts through the creation of a TV advertisement. The group is made to understand the stereotypical role modeling in the advertisements and in the entertainment industry in general.*

Module IV Societal analysis

- 1) News last month: highlights and discussions
- 2) General information about Kanchipuram district, Tamil Nadu and India (capital, number of districts, regions, languages, capitals etc), major countries of the world)
- 3) Societal inequities
- 4) Major social issues and problems; brainstorm the group and build on it. Could be political structure, caste divisions, poverty and distribution of wealth, population, corruption etc
- 5) Alternative models of economic organization, political organization
- 6) What kind of society do we want to build?

Example of game used in the session

1) A role-playing game: Three participants are asked to take part in the game. The situation is that there is fruit seller, a trader of fertilizers and a perfume maker. The fruit seller is selling a fruit, which grows every twelve years. The fruit is unique in that the skin of the fruit has excellent fertilizer properties and the flesh of the fruit can be used for manufacturing high quality fragrance. The trader of fertilizers asks for the price, which the fruit seller says is Rs 20,000 per basket. The perfume maker comes and the fruit seller raises the cost of the basket. The two buyers start on an auctioning process raising the price of the basket. The role-play is stopped. The members are asked to work on the solution. The situation could be saved through the process of conciliation, where the two buyers could have brought the basket and shared the fruit of the business, the fertilizer trader taking the skin and the perfume maker taking the flesh of the fruit. Mutual discussion and participation, minimum time usage and above all trust and confidence in one another are the major takeaways in this exercise.

Module V: Practical information needed to function as effective Panchayat members

- 1) Collection of information about their own villages and sharing them
- 2) Panchayat: powers and responsibilities

3) Information about specific schemes

- 1) *The district of Kanchipuram with the administrative block boundaries is drawn on the floor. Each block is assigned a number. The names of all the blocks accompanied by numbers is written in small pieces of paper, shuffled and placed in a bin. The names of the blocks are as follows; Mamallapuram, Maraimalainagar, Pummel, Uttiramerur, Thirukazuikundram, Kunrattur, Nandambakkam, Perungulattur, Wallajahbad, Chittalapakkam, Anakaputtur, Shriperumbudur, Nandivaram, Guduvancheri, Pumudivakkam, Sholinganallur, Mangadu, Thirupporur, Karungazhi, Thiruneermalai, Chembakkam, Acchirapakkam, Cheviliamedu, Madambakkam, Perungudi, Idakkalinadu, Pirkanakkaranai, Pallikaranai, Meenambakkam, Kattangulathur. Members are asked to pick up one of the pieces. The person who has number one should read out the name of the block and stand in the place where her block is numbered. She calls out for the second number and the person holding the number spells out the name. A modification of the game would be as follows. A circle is drawn around the already drawn map of Kanchipuram. Only nine chits are scattered on the circle. The trainers start clapping hands, after clapping is stopped, participants will have to pick up the piece of paper and stand on the number, which has been written on the map. In the next round only seven chits are thrown in till there are only two who have won the game. The game tells them about their district.*

Operationalising the programme

The first ward meeting was held on March 26, 1998. The initial meeting was more to arrive at a certain comfort level between the ward members and the trainers. Participants were asked if they could come for the whole training programme. Some of them expressed reservations. Some of the women wanted a loosely structured programme, because they felt that they could not come regularly for the training session. The RUWSEC core group told them that they could come to the meeting at their convenience. Members were told about the structure of the programme and how two days of training would be held every month. The dates would be intimated to them through post at the beginning of the month so that they keep themselves free to come for the programme.

Members who attended the programme

Number of women ward members who opted for the programme	48
Number who finally attended the programme	42
Number who came continuously for the programme	26
Number who attended once in two months	6
Number who attended once in three months	10
Number who dropped out in the middle of the programme because of pressure from husbands and leaders	6

The women who came for the programme were very shy and could not verbalize on a number of key issues such as their role in the Panchayat process, status of women in their

villages etc. They seemed to be lacking in basic life skills such as being able to talk freely about themselves. The invisible patriarchal control seemed to have had its effect on the women. An ice breaking exercise was conducted to help the women to know each other. The group was divided into two, with each member assigning herself number 1 and 2. Participants who had called out 1 were asked to form an inner circle. Participants who had called out number 2 were asked to form an outer circle. Music was played, and the inner circle moved in a clockwise direction, while the outer circle moved in an anti clockwise direction. At the stop of music, the participants facing each other had to reveal to each other, her name, the village from which she came from, her family and something about herself. This was done three times. Afterwards, each member had to recall details about the three members that she had met.

Though all the sessions contained the five broad modules of training that had been envisaged at the start of the programme, primary importance was given to the life skills module from May 1998 to February 1999. The deliberate accent on this module was given to help the ward members to cope with their ongoing Panchayat activities, and also help them in coping with the day-to-day challenges in life. From February 1999 to 2001 January training meetings started giving importance to reproductive health systems and practices, and problems connected with the same as also common diseases, symptoms of cancer, communicable diseases such TB etc. Panchayat related issues, social awareness and issues of national importance were other modules of the training sessions. Responsibilities on training and awareness creation were assigned to respective trainers to cover the modules. Wherever necessary, expert guidance from outside of RUWSEC was tapped to converge on the programme.

From January 2000 to June 2000, participants were made to undergo field visits to the Tirupporur Public Health Centre, every alternate month and report to RUWSEC during the intervening months of their response to the visits.

Infrastructure study among the villages

In July 1998, the women ward members were given a structured questionnaire about the infrastructure of their village Panchayat and asked to fill in the details. This was an exercise in familiarization of the village Panchayat from where the women had participated in the political process. The details of the survey included the status of the wards, balwadis, schools, housing, health and hygiene, agricultural operations, drinking water, electricity, housing status and the administrative presence in the village panchayat. The questionnaire was a self-administered one. The purpose of the exercise was to make the women ward members understand about their own Panchayat, which they did not know about. In the first meeting the ward members had mentioned that they wanted to know about the various works contracts that were undertaken by the Panchayat, so that they could also be in a position to participate in the process of “getting contracts”. The perception among the women was that the people participation in the political process meant only contract jobs and nothing more.

All the forty-eight women were asked to participate in the exercise. The 48 women represented 40 Village Panchayats. It is interesting to note that only ten members completed the whole questionnaire. The rest had however made a sincere effort in the information gathering process, though they had left some gaps in the some of the areas. However what was interesting was that all the Panchayat ward members had inspected the respected places like the schools, the water taps etc. They had also gone to the Block Development Officer's office to collect whatever information was forthcoming.

Highlights of the information gathered by the participants:

Balwadis

Balwadis have been established in all the villages. Government records indicate that at least 50 to 60 children attend the Balwadis. On closer scrutiny and inspection it was found that only 15 children came to the Balwadis regularly, though attendance records stated that there were at least 50 children.

Schools

Of the 40 villages from where the women came, 23 had elementary schools and 9 had secondary schools in the villages. 8 villages did not have any schools at all. And in some cases children often had to trudge four to five kilometers to reach their school destination

The elementary schools had only one teacher each. The secondary schools were equipped with two or three teachers. On enquiring on the low turnout of teachers in these schools, it was revealed that there were no bus services and most teachers sought a transfer within six months of their posting to these schools.

In the secondary schools, each class accommodated about 50 students. And due to paucity of space, most classes were carried out under the trees and on the corridors of the school premises.

Hygiene and Sanitation

Only 6 Health Sub centers were functioning in the 40 villages. The VHNs or the Villages Health Nurses visited the sub centers once a month and carried out their distribution of medicines at the Balwadis.

Agricultural operations

The survey tried to understand the extent of agricultural operations in terms of cultivated lands, split of dry and wet lands, and waste lands, government lands, privately owned lands etc. However the participants were not able to gather such detailed information.

Drinking water

8 villages did not have access to drinking water. All the other villages had some kind of access of drinking water.

Housing

Information such as households residing in own homes and households with land documents could be not assessed.

Electricity

In the colony areas of the villages, public distribution of electricity or streetlights were functioning properly. However tubes and bulbs are fitted only during the time of elections and religious festivals.

Government schemes

Government schemes do not reach the beneficiaries. Influential families, which had some political or monetary clout, were able to access the government schemes.

Who can resolve the issues pertaining to the villages

Most of the social problems in the village communities were generally solved with the intervention of the police. Sometimes the elders of the villages also help in diffusing a crisis. The administrative staff of the Panchayat roles did not associate themselves with such problems.

A sample of one completed questionnaire

Name of the village:	Kerapakkam
Number of the village:	234
Area of the village:	4,45,995 hectares
Number of villages under the Panchayat:	5
Name of the Panchayat Union:	Kerapakkam Panchayat
District:	Kanchipuram
Castes	Vanniyars, Yerawas, Adi Dravadis, Irulas
Population	1209
Balwadi status	One Balwadi;
	Number of teachers: 2
	Number of children enrolled: 98
	Number of children attending regularly: 45
School Status:	Primary School: 1
	Number of teachers: 2
	Number of girls: 43
	Number of boys: 27
Health status:	Health sub center: 1; The Voluntary Health Nurse visits the village once a month and delivers the medicines to one of the teachers of the Balwadi
Agricultural status:	Nanjai Land: 49265 acres
	Punjai land: 75.225 acres
	Government land: 2693.5 acres
	Other government lands: 6,18.5 acres
	Temple lands: 47 acres
	Common Land: 298 acres
Drinking water:	One common well. Drinking water taps also available
Housing	50 households did not own a patta. The rest own Houses; Almost all houses have thatched roofings
Government schemes availed	free well scheme, Ganga Kalyan yojana
Panchayat details	Gram Sabha had not been convened
Electricity	One light in every house
Administrative presence	Most problems solved through police intervention and counseling

NEWS and Current affairs

Novel methods in training

One of the most challenging sessions of the training programme was the societal analysis module. The ward members were given training to understand, accommodate, analyze and respond to discussions on important social, economic and cultural issues. The ward members were made to think logically on national issues. One of the key methods appropriated for the training was the use of radio broadcast in the training sessions. This was done because it was found that almost every household in the village had a radio and all the ward members had access to radio. In the training schedule, they were asked to listen to radio broadcast and question and enquire into the basis of news and other related topics. The question of who, what, why and how were the strands from which women were made to think and appreciate factors that were of vital importance to their communities.

It is interesting to note that initially the women were unable to understand the news read out by the broadcasters. Regular feedback revealed that the newscaster was “very fast” in her reading and they were unable to comprehend what was being said. This also in a way indicates that women were not trained to listen to news and current events and therefore their interests in such issues were minimal and almost non-existent. To help them grasp the meaning of news broadcast, radio news was recorded in audiocassettes and played out during the training meetings. They were trained to understand the language and substance of news broadcasting. Their interests in major current news were kindled through regular interaction by the trainers who explained them the significance of information shared during a current affairs programme.

In a similar vein newspaper reading was also inculcated in the women ward members. The women looked at reading newspapers as only a “male activity” and therefore were not even very enthusiastic about reading the papers. This also shows that reading newspapers as a necessary activity was not given much importance. Of course, one crucial element was that majority of the members were not literate. Once the literacy classes commenced they also showed some interest in this particular strain of activity. To facilitate understanding of news, headlines with large and bold typefaces were pasted onto flip charts and circulated in class or pinned up on black boards for them to read loudly and savor the meaning of the news. Initially, the news content centred around national events and about the state of Tamil Nadu. Local news such as the activities of the BDO, corruption stories, human interest stories at the village level and other local events were discussed in class through the newspaper clipping aids. As a result the interest in news became one of the key features of the programme, which in turn highlighted the need and hunger for information that was relevant and necessary

Listening to radio broadcast and understanding the current events was one of the major training modules imparted to the women ward members. As a result, women were able to clearly understand the various programmes announced by the government from time to time, the macro and micro economic policies for district administration and the role of the Panchayat and people participation in a democratic set up.

Specific reference to the literacy module

In 1998 February when the training programmes started, 48 women ward members had volunteered for the programme. The education profile of the ward members was as follows:

Members who did not know to read and write:	22
Those who had studied up to class eight	20
Those who had studied up to tenth:	5
Those who had studied up to + 2	1

Of the Panchayat women who attended the training session, a little less than half of them were not able to read and write. The age group of the ward members who had opted for literacy training ranged from 28 years to 45 years. One of them had studied up to class 2, but her reading and writing skills were very poor. During the first meeting, the women wanted to know if they could be taught the skills of reading and writing. The women however were extremely defensive about their literacy status. It was almost as if they would like to hide the fact that they were not literate. However, after the ice breaking session, the women confided about their literacy status. They opened up to the fact that because they did not know to read and write, they were hampered in the Panchayat meetings where they were unable to comprehend the minutes of the meeting and the resolutions passed by the Panchayat board. The core group of RUWSEC realized that such being the education levels of the ward members it was quite difficult for them to understand about the working of the PHCs and also actively participate in health intervention for the communities.

A customized literacy programme was planned for the ward members. This was a very flexible module where classes were conducted at the convenience of the learners.

The model used was the “one to one” teaching method. This was resorted to because most of the women were shy and did not want the others to know that they were undergoing literacy classes. Moreover, most of them said that they would not have the time to attend to a regular teaching module. Each of the ward members had her family responsibility and problem. They were inhibited in coming to any other office to a literacy center because of their status as ward members. Besides they were also vary of some of the disparaging remarks that their children and husbands made about their literacy status. The literacy classes were taken to their homes keeping in mind the sensitivities of the problem.

The programme was conducted for the ward members three days in a week for three hours from August 1998 to 1999 August. Each ward member was assigned an individual teacher, who would take the classes for the members at their homes. The programme was conducted for 12 days in a month. The programmes spanned teaching of the Tamil alphabets and numbers to incorporating lessons such as “my family, my village, my Panchayat, my corporation, my district etc”. Reading and writing included teaching the initials to separate words to separate sentences. This was imparted in a very simple manner. It took them one year to master the letters and the words. Health and hygiene literature were introduced through stories and picture books. Some of the topics on gender roles were also taught to them. Finally they were made to write sentences, small stories and towards the end of the course they were able to successfully read the letters, papers and files at the Panchayat office.

By the time the women had mastered the art of reading and writing, group teaching was introduced to the learners. The ward members underwent group training so that they could compare and correct the learning that they had undertaken. Evaluation exercises were conducted for the women after they had completed the sessions. This was done in early 2000. Lessons were sent through post and responses elicited on the lessons from them. The women had not forgotten their skills of reading and writing and they had truly become “Literate”.

Some responses from the ward members on the literacy programmes

“The programme was very useful. I am able to read the decisions made in the Panchayat meetings”.

“I am able to read handouts and understand the information”.

“Earlier my husband used to attend the meetings. Now I attend them myself. I listen to the radio and I am able to understand and analyse information.”

“I feel self confident. I get more respect. I am able to read signboards on my own.”

Specific reference to the health module

It is really interesting to note that what started as a conscious effort to bring into focus health care needs of the communities and the people political process developed into an extraordinary programme that encompassed the whole dynamics of societal improvement in everyday living. However, health and health needs were woven into the training sessions for the ward members. Aspects such as our bodies ourselves, reproductive health, pregnancy, pre natal and post-natal care, childcare, contraception, common varieties of diseases, cancer ailment and treatment etc were some of the modules that were taken for the participants. Accent was also given on general hygiene and

cleanliness. Finally the training sessions also dovetailed key aspects into making the women active advocates of health and health needs of their communities.

After the training programme, which completed in 1999, the women were taken on a trip to the Public Health Centres. The schedule was timed in such a way, that they would visit the PHC one month, report to RUWSEC the next month and again visit the PHC, the month after. Thus they visited the PHCs in January, March and May 2000 and reported on their visits to RUWSEC on February, April and June 2000.

The primary objective of taking Panchayat Ward members to the Public Health Centers was to equip ward members about the role of PHCs, health and hygiene and gender and taking such messages to the larger consumers of society

The women ward members were taken to the Thirpporur Primacy Health Centre. This was done to make them experience the functions of the Primary Health Centre, first hand, to understand the workings and try to bring about changes in the PHC administration and bring it to the Panchayat and through discussions with other members bring it to the notice of the state government, in their capacity as a political representative of the state.

The changes brought about in the PHCs through the intervention of the Panchayat members

- The trip to the PHCs by the ward members brought about a close interaction between the members, the villagers and the PHC functionaries, the doctors and the administrative staff.
- The ward members became aware of the surrounding health and hygiene aspects of the PHCs.
- The ward members brought about an awareness about the PHC and its needs to the Gram Panchayat and the Gram Sabha
- The ward members arranged health exhibitions in balwadis in their respective villages, and the women leaders in Panchayat worked closely with the Village Health Nurses to improve the status of women in their villages.
- The women Panchayat members also worked closely with the VHNs and encouraged and enthused them to actively visit homes which was part of their duties, and most often not undertaken by the VHNs.
- Some members also made arrangements for immunisation/vaccination programmes through the health centre. They also escorted women to the various health camps for immunisation, polio drops, and white discharge. In some instances they also accompanied women referrals to the Hindu Mission Hospital, Tambaram, RUWSEC clinic, and the A.R.T. Hospital.

Some of the reactions of the Ward members on their visit to the PHCs

“ If the doctor was more forthcoming in telling his patient the exact nature of his sickness/disease and also detailing the curative aspects of the sickness, that would be nice...”

“ The PHC functionaries should be polite and sensitive to the patients whilst talking to them”

“The PHC should be fully equipped with important facilities like drinking water and toilet. This cannot be done through Panchayats, because when questioned, they display their helplessness about the situation.”

Changes among the ward members after the completion of the training

On completion of the training programme, some of them shared their training experiences. There was a visible change seen among the members. Members felt that Panchayat duty was only one of the means to a definitive purpose of service to society on the whole. Some of the key issues that was central to the development of society were highlighted by the ward members:

- Good hygienic conditions and a clean environment were necessary for the well being of the Panchayat sector.
- Improvement in school education
- Empowerment of women in terms of women's, entrepreneurship, loans form Banks through schemes such as TRYSEM etc.
- Succor to the aged and the widows by helping them with access to grants
- Arrange for marriage expenses for girls who had completed Class 10.
- Compulsory enrolment and education of children and readmission for children who have dropped out of school.
- Help access government schemes such as Jeevan Dhara, Medical help, drought relief etc

- Work in close cooperation with the youth club and the *Madhar Sangams* of the villages to bring about visible changes and improvement in communities through emancipation of women. The development of the village in the empowerment of women was a major takeaway for the ward members who had undertaken Panchayat training.

Change brought in the communities by the ward members

Effects of the training programme could be seen during the middle of the whole course. The women were actively working in bringing about changes in the villages. Most of the women worked in close cooperation with the *Madhar Sangams* and the youth clubs. If there were no women's groups in the village they enthused the other women of the village and set up *sangams* in almost all the villages that the participants came from. The leadership drive that the women showed and the effective team coordination and participation that the women displayed is seen in some of the incidents that the women initiated.

- In the village of Melayur, the dead were being carried through a shortcut that cut through the village, for the last 40 years despite the fact that there exists a regular path for carrying the dead to the cremation ground. This hampered the sowing operations and cultivation activities in the village. Moreover most of the material that was taken along with the dead body was burnt near their own houses. Ward member Arojamma constituted a *Madhar Sangam*, which successfully changed the practise and restored the old path that is now being followed by the village.
- In Valavanthangal, the cremation ground allotted to the Dalits did not have a proper pathway. As a result a number of problems arose with every dead body that was carried to the cremation ground. In such a situation, Chellamal, a ward member, created a *Madhar Sangam* and through the sangam moved the government to set up a separate pathway leading to the burial ground.
- Melayur village did not have a high school and had only a middle school. As a result, girls who had studied up to class eight had to walk eight kilometers to go to a high school because no buses plied in that area. M Shanthi, a ward member through the *madhar sangam* successfully applied for the change of the secondary school to a high school in the village.
- Kondathangi village is a highly populated village spread over a considerable geographical space, which is contiguous to the reserved forest area. However there was no ration shop near the village. Susheela, a ward member, along with the women of the village petitioned to the Forest Department to set up a ration shop in the reserved forest area. The Forest department acted on the petition and set up a ration shop near the village area.

- Shanthi, a ward member who belonged to Kirpak, had donated about 2 acres 20 years ago to a missionary to set up an elementary school. The missionary ran the school for some time and then later built houses on the land gifted to him and sold it to others in the village. Shanthi and other members of the *Madhar Sangam* wrested control of the land and have since started the school in the area.
- Mullikollathur village did not have access to drinking water. Padma and Kuppama, two ward members, took on the task of providing drinking water to the village through the *Madhar Sangam*.
- Saraswati a ward member of Neikuppi, had two children a boy and a girl. But she gave a lot of preference to boy over the girl. Everyday, she gave her son an egg and did not give it to her daughter. After two of years of training she shared this incident with her colleagues that she had all along been very partial to the boy and did not give much heed to the health of her girl. She said that both the boy and the girl should be given equal treatment at all levels.
- Every ward member saw to it that the common well was cleaned with alum every month and that the taps and the surroundings were sparkling clean without any water logging or dirt at the tap use stage.
- The entire 26 ward members said that they had learnt to read and write properly and could now be confident of tackling any problems and issues that came their way. This was the biggest gift that they had received from RUWSEC training, the ward members said.

Investments in the programme

For a programme that was multi dimensional in nature, an optimal cost expenditure was incurred. The two-year training programme, which began in March 1998, completed its course in June 2000. The total investment for the programme was Rs 1, 57, 900, almost evenly spread out between the Panchayat training programme and the literacy programme. The nature of the programme demanded a high level of participation and strategic thinking on the part of the RUWSEC group that worked on the programme. The break up of the costs was as follows:

Components	Cost (Rs)
1) Overall Training of women leaders in Panchayat	84,698
Of which	
Travel, food and honorarium for participants, resource persons fees and travel	77,776
Materials for training, stationery	6,922
2) Literacy for women in Panchayat	73,199
Including honorarium for teachers, materials, stationery, honorarium for learners	
Total (1+2)	1,57,900

Follow Up

After the two year training programme, a meeting was held with the ward members who had trained under RUWSEC in June 2000. Some of the issues that could be seen during the meeting:

- The members had become change agents in the development and the advancement of the village and the women.
- The ward members seemed to be working in close coordination with the teachers, the anganwadi workers and the civil society at large in their respective areas.
- The ward members were also involved in helping out the villagers in their health needs, by taking them to the PHCs or monitoring the workings of the Village Health Nurse.
- Most of the ward members were able to identify the symptoms of communicable and other diseases and prompt action was taken by taking the patients to the sub center or to the Public Health Centre.

Post Training evaluation by the trainers

The core group, which worked closely on the programme, has recommended certain modifications and improvements to the programme, that they successfully completed. Some of the suggestions for the next programme are as follows:

- Fieldwork should be made an important component of the training programme. In the Panchayat training programme, the fieldwork that was incorporated included visits to the Public Health centers. However in future programmes more field visits to the PHCs must be built into the programme to ensure closer coordination among the triad of the people's representatives, the administrative units and the communities on the whole.
- Ward members should be made to interact with the *Madhar Sangams*, and the youth clubs under a controlled environment, so that work strategies discussed during the meeting could be closely monitored and made to fructify. Moreover some of the members of the *Madhar Sangam* and youth club should be also given training once in six months along with the Panchayat women ward members.
- There should be greater interaction and communication in terms of letters and discussions among the ward members, the VHN and the President of the Panchayat where a health centre exists.
- In the literacy programme, after an initial three month training, the programme should be split up as follows; one to one teaching for 3 months, group teaching for 15 months and finally postal teaching for five months
- A five-day training programme for the literacy teachers should be adopted to familiarise them with the customized literacy services that RUWSEC would be offering.

Postscript

The Panchayat training programme was one of the most dynamic programmes that RUWSEC has ever experimented upon. For one the programme was extremely varied and multi-dimensional in nature and for RUWSEC itself, this was a learning process. One yardstick for measuring the success of the programme was the recent Panchayat elections that were conducted by the state in September 2001. Of the 26 members who had attended the training session, 11 of them had contested the village Panchayat elections in 2001. Seven of the women ward members who attended the training programme have won the elections. The rest of the women are extremely active in their respective *madhar sangams* and have also started self-help groups and credit cooperative societies. This in a way is an objective evaluation result of RUWSEC's effort in empowering women in Panchayats and through them, the communities.