
Revisiting the Nexus Between Social Capital and Economic Empowerment: A Micro-Level Study of Kudumbashree

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Abstract

The paper analyses the relationship between social capital and women empowerment through Kudumbashree. Kudumbashree is a community network programme targeted on poverty alleviation and women empowerment launched by the State Poverty Eradication Mission, Government of Kerala in 1997. Based on the traits of social capital like fostering of trust, community networks and norms, the study exhibits the influence of collective participation increases the degree of women empowerment at the grass root level.

Keywords: *Kudumbashree, social capital, personal empowerment, social empowerment, economic empowerment, political empowerment, women empowerment*

Introduction

Kudumbashree, a community network, is the poverty alleviation and women empowerment scheme launched by the State Poverty Eradication Mission (SPEM) of the Kerala Government. The term Kudumbashree means 'prosperity of the family' in the vernacular language of Kerala, which is Malayalam. Kudumbashree was established in 1997 based on the recommendations of a Task Force appointed by the Government of Kerala. Implementation of Kudumbashree was in the context of the decentralization of powers to the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in Kerala.

Kudumbashree consists of a three-tier structure including Neighbourhood Groups

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(NHGs) at the bottom level, Area Development Societies (ADS) at the central/middle wing, and Community Development Societies (CDS) at the local government level. By 2000-2002, Kudumbashree was extended to entire districts of Kerala and by 2025 of September, Kudumbashree has 2,94,436 Neighbourhood groups (NHG) with affiliation to 19,489 Area development Societies and 1064 Community Development Societies. There are a total of 45,85,677 women as members of Kudumbashree in Kerala (GoK 2025). The membership in Kudumbashree units is open, and any adult woman can be a part of the unit. However, the membership is limited to only one member in a family.

Women empowerment is a stage which is to be reached by women through their participation and involvement in certain activities/ programmes. These participation or involvements in those activities helps women to enhance knowledge and awareness about their rights and various entitlements, which in turn motivate them to be economically and financially independent, socially involved, politically active and dynamic. It also refers to a phase where the women enjoy the benefits of their achievements with proper safety and adequate security.

Tandon (2016) explains that women empowerment is not just about personal identity but a broader term that analyses human rights and societal justice. It refers to a complex definition of gender issues and stands for transforming the power relations in the society. Empowerment argues for equal distribution of freedom, opportunities and power between men and women. It also stands for giving freedom and power to women to take decisions especially in areas that affect themselves and their families.

Measurements of women empowerment

An index to measure women empowerment was constructed by integrating various domains of women empowerment based on the literature review and those domains include personal, social, economic, financial, and political empowerment. This study used the following variables for measuring women empowerment of Kudumbashree members. The variables are measured with different scales of measurement.

Table.3.1. Measurements of women empowerment

Personal empowerment	Social empowerment	Economic empowerment	Financial empowerment	Political empowerment
Confidence	Interactive skills	Economic status	Income	Interest in representation in local self govt. bodies
Independence	Group cohesiveness and trustworthiness	Employment opportunity	Expenditure	Participation in protest and processions

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Self-respect	Organizational skill	Technical skill	Savings	Awareness about rights
Mutual respect	Public speaking	Entrepreneurial skill	Financial security	Equal access to govt programs
Family acceptance	Awareness on rights	Individual/family health	Personal belongings	
Relative acceptance	Acceptance in society	Living conditions	management skills	
	Awareness on social problems	Social security		
	Participation in social programmes			

The components of women empowerment act as a strong base for social capital formation. So, the contribution of Kudumbashree programme in Kerala is very significant in the generation of social capital and women empowerment.

Measurements of Women Empowerment Index

The study has constructed women empowerment Index by aggregating the above five dimensions of women empowerment.

$$\text{Women empowerment Index} = \frac{\sum(\text{PI} + \text{SI} + \text{EI} + \text{FI} + \text{PEI})}{5}$$

PI = Personal empowerment index

SI = Social empowerment index

EP = Economic empowerment index

FI = Financial empowerment index

PEI = Political empowerment index

This index is an average index of all five dimensions of women empowerment. This method is the simplest and widely used method to calculate women empowerment. This study adopted this measurement to calculate women empowerment of Kudumbashree members. The five dimensions of women empowerment index is calculated by constructing the following equations.

$$\text{Personal empowerment index (PI)} = \frac{(C + I + \text{SR} + \text{MR} + \text{FA} + \text{RA})}{6}$$

C = Confidence

I = Independence

SR = Self respect

MR = Mutual Respect

FA = Family Acceptance

RA = Relative Acceptance

$$\text{Social empowerment index (SI)} = \frac{(IS + GC + OS + PS + AR + AS + ASP + PSP)}{8}$$

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IS = Interactive skill

GC = Group Cohesiveness

OS = Organisational skill

PS = Public Speaking

AR = Awareness on rights

AS = Acceptance in society

ASP = Awareness on social problems

PSP = Participation in social program

Economic empowerment index (EI) = $(ES+EO+TSL+ESL+IH+LC+SS)/7$

ES = Economic status

EO = Employment opportunities

TSL = Technical skill

ESL = Entrepreneurial skill

IH = Individual/family health

LC = Living conditions

SS = Social security

Financial Empowerment Index (FEI) = $(Y+E+S+FS+PB+MS)/6$

Y=Income

E=Expenditure

S=Savings

FS=Financial Security

PB=Personal Belongings

MS=Management Skill

Political empowerment Index (PEI) = $(IRLS+PPP+AAR+EAG)/4$

IRLS = Interest in representation in local self-government bodies

PPP = Participation in protest and processions

AAR = Awareness about rights

EAG = Equal access to govt programs.

Methodology:

The study has used a structured questionnaire to collect the information from Kudumbashree members. The questionnaire confined the variables such as Likert scale variables, nominal and ratio scale variables. The questions related to women empowerments are measured on a 1-5 Likert scale. The internal consistency of Likert scale questions has been verified and qualified by using Cronbach Alfa. The values of Cronbach Alfa is greater than 0.9 for all Likert scale variables. The study has applied statistical tools such as the percentage method, frequency distribution, cumulative frequency distribution, mean, standard deviation and cross tabulation.

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Analysis and findings:

The sample consists of 100 respondents, out of which 46.8 percent of the people are Hindus followed by Christians (28.7 percent) and Muslims (24.5 percent). The 49.5 percent of the sample respondents who are working in Kudumbashree belong to the general category, and it is followed by Other Backward Communities (OBC) with a representation of 38.5 percent. Scheduled Caste constitutes 10.8 percent. Scheduled tribes become the least represented caste group as they constitute only 1.2 percent of the sample population. The education status of the members working in Kudumbashree shows that the members are moderately educated, as 79.2 percent of the members had education up to higher secondary level. However, as the number of people having an educational qualification of graduation and above are comparatively less, the group will not be getting the benefits and services of educated members. The economic status of the respondents reveals that 36 percent of the members are BPL card holders.

The analysis highlights a higher degree of personal empowerment with respect to education, marital status, usage of smartphones, and regular attendance in neighbourhood meetings. This helps to foster increased access to information, maintenance of relationships and trust, which constitute the core components of social capital. Education and digital inclusion significantly improve the capacity of women, especially in interaction and finding new avenues for their livelihood.

The participation in Kudumbashree programme highlights the significance of social capital generation through regular and sustained participation in Neighbourhood Groups. Regular meetings, collective activities, and peer support help in fostering confidence, efficiency, self-respect and independent decision-making capacity. These potentials are the basis for personal empowerment.

The relatively high degree of economic empowerment among the marginalised and less educated members illustrates that the diversified activities undertaken by Kudumbashree Mission act as a platform for nurturing social capital formation. The programmes comprise collective entrepreneurship, micro finance, access to finance and savings. These initiatives open up a new path for women towards new economic networks. But the long-term gain is limited by structural constraints like low market access and limited market size.

Social empowerment shows the strongest association with social capital formation. The increased years of experience in Kudumbashree equip women with enhanced trust, reciprocity and collective identity, which are essential for building social capital formation.

Financial empowerment has a strong association with social capital, mainly through financial inclusion and better access to formal financial institutions. Media exposure and smartphone usage enhance financial literacy and knowledge.

The linkage between political empowerment and the generation of social capital is so firm through the increased participation of women in local self-governance and in the decision-making process. Kudumbashree flagged the way for political inclusion by compiling the marginalised women and helping them move towards the mainstream economic and political spaces. The analysis reveals that the degree of political empowerment is high

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compared to economic and social empowerment among the members of the Kudumbhasree mission. This helps to enhance leadership quality, skill and political awareness.

Conclusion: In light of these findings, it is evident that empowerment is not the outcome of individual attributes, but it serves as a foundation of a strong social capital formation through connecting women to institutions and resources. The study undoubtedly proves that the Kudumbashree programme of Kerala government is a flagship programme and it has all the potential to expand to all other states in the country in its efforts to alleviate poverty and to empower the women.

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