

Gender Equity and Women Empowerment: A case study of Kudumbashree in Kerala, India

Anlia Thelekkatte¹, Anusree R.², Anagha T.V.³

Department of Public Policy, Manipal Academy of Higher Education,
Manipal, India

Correspondence: ¹anlia.dppblr2023@learner.manipal.edu,

²anusree.dppblr2023@learner.manipal.edu,

³anagha.dppblr2023@learner.manipal.edu

ORCID: ¹[0009-0000-2739-7341](https://orcid.org/0009-0000-2739-7341), ³[0009-0007-3702-6334](https://orcid.org/0009-0007-3702-6334)

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Abstract

Kudumbashree, a pioneering women-centric program in Kerala, India, addresses gender equity through a multifaceted approach. This mission empowers women by providing skill development programmes and fostering micro-enterprises. The programme boasts a three-tiered women's network, offering training in various fields like traditional crafts, hospitality, and IT. These programs equip women with skills for self-employment or salaried work, boosting their economic independence and social mobility. Neighbourhood groups within the network provide a supportive learning environment, crucial for overcoming social barriers faced by women entering the workforce. Kudumbashree also supports micro-enterprises by offering financial aid and training to women entrepreneurs. While successful ventures exist, challenges remain. Limited marketing and branding restrict some enterprises to local markets. Additionally, reaching out to women from underserved communities requires targeted strategies. Collaboration with industry experts, establishing marketing and sales teams, and encouraging innovative business ideas are potential solutions. A supportive business ecosystem at the state level could further empower Kudumbashree women. By addressing these challenges and capitalizing on its strengths, Kudumbashree can continue to empower women, fostering socio-economic transformation in Kerala.

Keywords: empowerment; enterprises; gender equity; skill development

Introduction

The Kudumbashree Mission has been a major success in the Indian state of Kerala with its customised women-centric approach, which has stood out as a pioneering model due to its variety in bringing in equity values and multifaceted functioning aspects. The scheme has focused on women's empowerment, higher women workforce participation, and poverty alleviation to bring gender equality.

Kudumbashree Mission is a visionary programme ideated and implemented by the Government of Kerala as a part of the state's poverty eradication mission (SPEM). The word Kudumbashree stands for 'the prosperity of the family' and originates in the state's language of Malayalam. Kudumbashree now represents the ambitious mission and the network of four to five million workers directly and indirectly involved in the project (**Kudumbashree Mission, n.d.**). It was set up in 1997 after long deliberations and discussions involving the Government of Kerala and the task committee, which was set up after the decision to decentralise, share, and transfer the powers of co-administration with local institutional systems such as Panchayati Raj. During the same time, the People's Plan campaign was making rounds, aiming to bring in democratic decentralisation on three fronts: administrative, fiscal, and politicalⁱ (**Kudumbashree Mission, n.d.**).

The mission has two broad objectives: to improve the living standards of women, particularly in rural areas, and to help them achieve economic security to remove poverty by helping them set micro-credit systems and enterprises, thus strengthening their livelihood, and leading to the improvement in socio-economic status (**Kudumbashree Mission, n.d.**).

The Mission follows a three-tier hierarchical system for its network for women, starting with neighbourhood groups (NHGs), followed by area development societies, and then community development societies at the local government level. The membership is open to adult women, and the membership limit is one per family. Even though it started off in a few districts, in 2015, in many different phases, the program was extended throughout the state. In 2011, the Central Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD) recognised the mission as a part of State Rural Livelihoods missions (SRLM).

Kudumbashree stands as a pioneering initiative in promoting women-led enterprises in a region where such concepts were relatively novel. Its sustained success and global recognition as a model for women's empowerment are testament to its effectiveness. To further enhance the impact of Kudumbashree, we aim to critically assess its functioning and identify areas for improvement. By understanding the strengths and

weaknesses of the program, we can propose evidence-based recommendations to optimize its future performance.

The study used a mixed, transdisciplinary perspective approach combining quantitative and qualitative insights gathered through surveys, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions during field visits. Sample populations were chosen from three districts of Kerala - Thrissur, Kannur, and Ernakulam among Kudumbashree workers, and Government officials. The data was collected from *Ayalkootams* (neighborhood groups or NHGs), *Ward Samithy* (Area Development Society/ADS), and *Panchayat Samithy* (Community Development Society/CDS). Secondary data collected focused on the present functioning of the programme combined with future possibilities.

Our fieldwork and interactions with Kudumbashree workers identified several shortcomings in this state government initiative that require attention. While Kudumbashree has potential, to promote and bring gender development and empowerment its functioning and operations, particularly in micro-enterprises, could be significantly strengthened. One area for improvement lies in marketing. Introducing brand marketing strategies and increasing subsidies for Kudumbashree product production could enhance their market visibility and competitiveness. Additionally, the skill development initiatives under Kudumbashree could be further developed to better equip members with the necessary skills for success.

This study highlights the potential for socio-economic transformation through gender and economic development, scalability of income-generating ventures, social inclusion, women's entrepreneurship, labor force participation, and gender equity. Let us delve deeper into two key areas that offer opportunities for improvement.

Skill Development

Skill development programs within Kudumbashree help empower women and foster their economic freedom. This plays a significant role in gaining economic and social freedom among women. Kudumbashree, through its various schemes like Employment through Skill Training and Placement (EST&P), Gender Self Learning Programme, Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY)ⁱⁱ, and Acquiring Resilience and Identity through Sustainable Employment (ARISE Skill Campaign), provides skill development training to empower women and help them secure jobs in the market. The skill development programs are conducted through campaigns, workshops, and classes. After the training sessions, placement is given through job *melas* (a local fair where goods are sold and brought), post-placement support and migration support centres for those placed

outside the state. To date, 1,17,247 trainees are beneficiaries of DDU-GKY.ⁱⁱⁱ

These skill development programmes assist women in developing their abilities, gaining financial independence, and achieving social mobility. Kudumbashree's emphasis on gender equality benefits not only individual women but also families and communities. The program's strength lies in the diversity of skill development options available. Kudumbashree caters to a wide range of interests and requirements by offering traditional crafts, hospitality, information technology, and personal development programmes. This flexibility ensures that women can select programmes appropriate to their goals, whether they want to start their own business, receive vocational training for salaried professions, or improve their life skills and confidence.

The programme is delivered through women's neighbourhood groups (NHGs), creating a friendly learning and networking atmosphere. This is especially useful for women who face social barriers when entering the workforce. Women in these meetings can share their experiences, overcome their concerns, and receive peer encouragement. The NHG is a safety net, making the learning process less scary and more likely to succeed. However, Kudumbashree has faced several challenges when it comes to undertaking skill development initiatives. Internal power struggles between functionaries at the ADS and CDS levels, as well as conflicts among group members at the local level, have hindered effective skill development initiatives.

The program's limited autonomy for members has left women vulnerable to local gender norms and the influence of existing power holders. This has restricted their ability to participate fully in skill development programs and express their preferences and opinions.

Additionally, the politicization of Kudumbashree's functioning and the overburdening of its members with multiple responsibilities have further hampered skill development efforts. These challenges have contributed to the program's difficulties in providing effective and accessible skill training to its members.

While the range of programmes available is remarkable, ensuring these skills remain relevant to the changing work market is critical for long-term success. Kudumbashree can expand its reach by performing frequent research on job market trends in Kerala and other Indian states. The programme can dramatically boost graduate employability by customising programme offerings to meet trends and market demands.

Equipping women with entrepreneurial skills is a crucial step, but further support is required beyond training for their businesses to thrive. Despite its success, Kudumbashree confronts difficulties in reaching out to women from underserved populations, such as lower *castes* (a division of society based on differences of wealth, inherited rank or privilege, profession, occupation, or race) or tribal groups. These groups frequently confront extra social and economic challenges that may limit their ability to participate fully in the programme. Kudumbashree can create targeted outreach strategies to promote participation from diverse groups, addressing the specific needs and challenges these groups face. This includes collaborating with community leaders, offering additional support services like childcare or transportation assistance, and providing culturally sensitive training modules. Partnerships with industry experts can also help adapt programmes to specific skill sets required in the workplace. By collaborating, stakeholders may build a more complete support system for women looking to enter or re-enter the workforce.

Microenterprises

Microenterprises in Kudumbashree empower women by enabling them to achieve financial independence. The Kerala government, through Kudumbashree, provides funding for entrepreneurship schemes such as the Rural Micro Enterprises Scheme and Yuvasree. Kudumbashree enterprises operate across various domains, including production, services, trading, and sales and marketing. Women, individually or in groups, can apply to start microenterprises by submitting their business plans to receive financial support from Kudumbashree. Initially, these women receive subsidies to mitigate business risks. Despite having a robust network of Kudumbashree entrepreneurs in Kerala, enterprises often face setbacks once they gain momentum. While catering units and restaurants tend to succeed, individual ventures such as apparel, handmade toiletries, and handicrafts struggle over time. The primary reason is the lack of a sustainable customer base. These products often compete only within their neighbourhoods due to limited marketing and branding efforts. Although Kudumbashree provides training to women entrepreneurs at the outset, it may not effectively equip them to understand market dynamics and plan their businesses accordingly. Regarding product sales, Kudumbashree microenterprises lack uniformity or a robust statewide network. They typically sell their products during annual fests or *melas* organised by Kudumbashree or opt for home-based sales. Unfortunately, both strategies are seasonal and do not guarantee stable revenue.

While Kudumbashree has achieved significant success in poverty alleviation, its microenterprise ventures have faced several challenges that hinder their sustainability and income generation. One of the major issues faced by these microenterprises is marketing. Lack of proper marketing strategies and limited market access for products have significantly impacted their ability to reach potential customers. Additionally, supply chain challenges, such as shortages of raw materials and difficulties in maintaining quality standards, have further constrained their operations. Technological limitations also pose significant challenges for Kudumbashree microenterprises. Insufficient access to modern technology and equipment hampers their productivity and competitiveness. Moreover, limited funding and rising costs of raw materials have exacerbated financial constraints. These factors have contributed to the struggle of many micro enterprises under Kudumbashree to generate stable income and maintain sustainability. Despite its initial success, the initiative now faces the challenge of adapting to a changing economic landscape and addressing the specific needs of its micro enterprise ventures. A recent study by SIDNET in several panchayats revealed that the Kudumbashree program has not significantly benefited Below Poverty Line (BPL) workers and has failed to reach its intended audience. Contrary to its intended role as the primary income generation option for BPL households, Kudumbashree in many cases is limited to providing additional income for educated and middle-class women who often participate in flexible ways (**Shihabudheen, 2013.**)

Many women abandon their businesses within a few months of starting due to challenges in attracting customers and recovering their initial investments. Infrastructure is also critical; inadequate storage facilities, transportation, and processing units hinder smooth business operations. Since microenterprises require working capital, women often resort to loans, which can become a financial burden. Family pressures sometimes lead to women quitting their enterprises.

The Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad has published a report highlighting the need to broaden the scope of the program to include all those who wish to participate and decentralise the mission to facilitate local orientation. These recommendations suggest that Kudumbashree could be more effective in addressing the needs of BPL households by becoming more inclusive and adaptable to local contexts. There is immense potential if efforts are made at the state level to create a supportive business ecosystem for Kudumbashree women. Customised and localised micro-enterprises could reflect specific localities' authentic culture and traditions, offering diverse products such as food, handicrafts, and apparel. Such initiatives could even boost the tourism sector if elevated to

a pan-India level. Kudumbashree can potentially become a brand representing Kerala's rich culture and traditions.

Kudumbashree's recent memorandum of understanding (MOU) with Amazon Saheli marks a significant milestone. Through this collaboration, Kudumbashree products gain visibility on Amazon's shopping app and website. However, to maximise success, several critical aspects need attention. Amazon Saheli's collaboration with Kudumbashree represents a promising step in enhancing market access for rural women entrepreneurs by showcasing their products on a global platform. However, critiques of Amazon Saheli highlight significant concerns regarding power imbalances and sustainability. One key issue is the dependence on corporate platforms, which may leave small producers vulnerable to policy changes such as commission rates and product visibility algorithms, reducing their bargaining power. Additionally, the benefits of such collaborations often favor larger, more resourceful producer groups, potentially sidelining marginalized entrepreneurs who struggle to meet quality or scalability demands. Critics also raise concerns about the commodification of culturally significant products, which risks diluting their authenticity to cater to global market tastes. Furthermore, from an epistemic perspective, these platforms can impose external knowledge systems that dictate production norms and pricing, undermining local autonomy and traditional practices. Addressing these challenges is crucial to ensuring that initiatives like Kudumbashree's partnership with Amazon Saheli foster true empowerment and equitable growth.

To further enhance the effectiveness from Kudumbashree's side, there is scope for improvements within the program itself. By addressing certain challenges and exploring innovative strategies, Kudumbashree can continue to empower women and drive social and economic change. First, ensuring product quality and effective marketing strategies is essential for capturing market share. Women entrepreneurs cannot achieve this alone; they require support from efficient marketing and sales teams. Second, Kudumbashree should encourage young participants to bring fresh ideas beyond traditional businesses. An innovative cell that manages sales, marketing, advertising, and social entrepreneurship tasks can drive growth. Lastly, policy coherence and proper coordination within the existing ecosystem will propel Kudumbashree women to new heights.

Enhancing Kudumbashree's Effectiveness: Policy recommendations for key challenges

To enhance the effectiveness of Kudumbashree's skill development and micro-enterprise programs, policy measures should prioritize alignment with market demands and tailored support for underserved populations. Regular job market analyses can inform the design of training programs, ensuring they remain relevant to emerging industries and enhance employability. Additionally, targeted outreach strategies, such as community-specific campaigns and the provision of childcare, transportation, and culturally sensitive training, can increase participation from marginalized groups, including women from lower castes and tribal communities. In particular, establishing crèche facilities would alleviate a significant barrier to participation by offering essential childcare services, thereby allowing more women to engage fully in entrepreneurship and training initiatives.

For microenterprises, sustained support beyond the initial setup phase is crucial. This includes providing ongoing mentorship, improving access to infrastructure, and developing comprehensive marketing and branding strategies to enable entrepreneurs to scale their businesses. Expanding e-commerce integration through platforms such as Amazon Saheli and other online marketplaces is vital for better market access, alongside implementing quality control mechanisms and digital marketing strategies. Further, organizing businesses into enterprise clusters, where women entrepreneurs collaborate within specific industries can foster shared resources, innovation, and stronger market linkages. This clustering approach would encourage economies of scale and strengthen the resilience of micro-enterprises. Finally, fostering a supportive business ecosystem through public-private partnerships, enhanced micro-financing options, and coordinated policy efforts can significantly boost the long-term viability of Kudumbashree enterprises and further the social and economic empowerment of women in Kerala.

These policies aim to address key challenges such as maintaining skill relevance, improving market access, and ensuring business sustainability. By focusing on market-oriented training, post-launch support, e-commerce expansion, and enterprise clustering, Kudumbashree can create a more robust pathway for women's economic independence, contributing to their upward social mobility. A unified policy framework that integrates financial incentives, infrastructure development, crèche services, and strategic partnerships will enhance the impact of these programs, promoting inclusive growth and broader economic development.

Conclusion

Even after being an ambitious programme that ran successfully, we believe that Kudumbashree can further empower women and foster economic growth once these implementation challenges are rectified.

Despite its success, Kudumbashree faces challenges in reaching women from underserved communities, including lower *castes* and tribal groups. These groups often encounter additional social and economic barriers that hinder their full participation in the program. To address these challenges, Kudumbashree can implement targeted outreach strategies. These may include collaborating with community leaders, providing additional support services (such as childcare or transportation assistance), and offering culturally sensitive training modules. By partnering with industry experts, the program can tailor its initiatives to match specific skill sets required in the workplace. Through collaboration, stakeholders can create a more comprehensive support system for women seeking to enter or re-enter the workforce.

Efforts at the state level can create a supportive business ecosystem for Kudumbashree women. There is a need for quality Products and effective Marketing: Ensuring product quality and implementing effective marketing strategies are crucial for capturing market share. Women entrepreneurs need support from efficient marketing and sales teams to succeed. They should empower young participants to bring fresh ideas beyond traditional businesses. Establishing an innovative cell to handle sales, marketing, advertising, and social entrepreneurship tasks can drive growth. Coherent policies and proper coordination within the existing ecosystem will propel Kudumbashree women to new heights.

There is a potential for socio-economic transformation catalysed development, scalability of income-generating ventures in major areas and levels of concern government, and administration, social inclusion of various communities like transgenders, encouraging entrepreneurship among women, labour force participation, and gender equity.

By recognising its strengths and addressing areas for improvement, the program may continue to positively influence women's lives while contributing to a more inclusive and prosperous Kerala.

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Anlia Thelekkatte is a postgraduate student in the Department of Public Policy at the Manipal Academy of Higher Education, Bengaluru, India. She graduated from the University of Delhi with a BA (Honours) in Political Science in 2023. Her research interests focus on migration governance, diaspora studies, local governance, and gender studies.



Anusree R is a postgraduate student in the Department of Public Policy at the Manipal Academy of Higher Education, Bengaluru, India. She did her undergraduate studies in Political Science (with Journalism) at the University of Calicut. Her research interests lie in Government Policy Analysis - Social, Economic and Environmental.



Anagha TV is a postgraduate student in the Department of Public Policy at the Manipal Academy of Higher Education, Bengaluru, India. She holds a master's degree in development studies from the Indian Institute of Technology, Mandi. Her research interests encompass Social Inclusion and Development Policy design and evaluation, with a particular focus on Legal Frameworks, Rights, and Governance for Social Justice.



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Endnotes

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