

Jinu Francis and Ajailiu Niumai

GENDER AND NOTIONS OF PATRIARCHY: ANALYSIS OF POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN THROUGH KUDUMBASHREE IN KOTTAYAM, KERALA

Abstract

This paper examines the transformation of women in Kerala from politically invisible entities to visible ones post Kerala Panchayati Raj Act (1992) which reserved 33 per cent seats for women in Local Self-Government Institutions. It further inspects the role of 'Kudumbashree', Kerala's prestigious women empowerment programme in politically empowering the participants. The study underpinning this article was conducted among the elected women Panchayat members in the Kottayam district of Kerala. This study with an embedded design conducted between 2018-2019 examined the lived experiences of 93 participants. Thematic and statistical analysis of the data collected revealed that the statutory reservation enhanced women's political and social visibility. In addition, women's experience with Kudumbashree equipped them with skills to perform better in governance. On the contrary, this paper pinpoints the unbreakable glass-ceiling that prevails in Kerala's political landscape regardless of the opportunities that the state-crafted spaces provided to women. Moreover, this paper confirms that women's exposure to the political sector and women empowerment agencies in Kerala stand inadequate in uprooting the age-old patriarchal social system.

Keywords: *Political Empowerment, Women Reservation, Kudumbashree, Women Empowerment, Patriarchy.*

Introduction

Women have been perceived to be economically and psychologically empowered in Kerala due to high literacy rates, but they do not thrive politically. A nominal representation of women in the State Legislative Assembly substantiates this view; for instance, though 76% of women cast their vote in the election, only eight women were elected to a 141 member Kerala Assembly in 2016. This same trend had been reflecting in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) until the passage of Panchayati Raj Bill. This indicates that something

JINU FRANCIS, Research Scholar and **AJAILIU NIUMAI**, Professor of Sociology, Centre for the Study of Social Exclusion and Inclusive Policy, University of Hyderabad, E-mail: ajainiumai@gmail.com.

is holding back women from achieving equal representation in the political sphere. A deep review of existing literature revealed the lack of scientific studies on the political status of women in the lower socio-economic strata of the society, despite an increasing number of researches on women empowerment. This study examines the role of Kudumbashree¹ (a state crafted space where women, especially those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, are invited to participate in activities targeted to empower them holistically) in empowering lower-middle-class women politically in Kottayam District of Kerala. This paper also seeks to examine if women's political consciousness can be raised through their exposure to Kudumbashree activities and to highlight respondents' gradual progression from an ordinary woman to a public figure through their active involvement with this programme. The transition brings enormous prestige and also spawns another phenomenon of closing spaces for other women entrants since all political offices seek to hold on to their offices irrespective of gender and consolidate their position leading to the rise of vested interests. Setting that aside, this paper sheds light on the transformation experienced by each elected women representative irrespective of their Kudumbashree membership, their intentions and motives to stay on in the political field for the long haul and the obstacles on their way to political leadership. This paper analyzed the process of their transformation from politically invisible entities to visible ones following the implementation of women reservation in Panchayats. Adopting a compare and contrast approach, we differentiated the performance of respondents with and without Kudumbashree exposure, in order to assess the role of this program in capacity building or equipping its members to excel in the political sphere.

Some questions arise as to how women's exposure in the Kudumbashree helps them to exercise their political agency in a more effective way? To what extent do the Kudumbashree members utilize the 'invited' space of political reservation to invent a 'space' for them to gain political individuation? Does this invited space turn out to be a curated space where the confines of activism are already pre-set? Does Kudumbashree stimulate women to climb up the political ladder and stay in political limelight for a longer period? Amartya Sen (1999) argues that 'one's inability to convert his/her innate capacities into useful functionings/achievements due to different deterrents in their social system can have a negative impact on their quality of life which in turn would 'prevent them from enjoying the kind of lives they have reasons to value'. Capability is essentially a combination of capacity, access to resources and ability. Lack of any one of these three would result in a severe deficit in the expected outcomes, and she will be left with a very limited number of 'choices' in her life to be economically, politically and socially active. Therefore, expanding one's capability to earn, to be more visible in society and to take part in political processes more actively opens up more options/choices in one's life, which may lead to his/her empowerment.

Amartya Sen (1984) refers the range of options (choices) a person has in deciding what kind of a life to lead as capabilities. Hence, development can be seen as 'a process of expanding the capabilities of people'. Capability expansion is nothing but empowerment. Since gender equality stays in theory rather than in reality, women avail unequal opportunities out of unequal social and political conditions (Nussbaum, 2001). Nussbaum's (2011) capability approach addresses the capability failure resulting from gender discrimination. Therefore, enhancing women's capabilities by improving their accessibility to credit facilities, creating constitutional provisions for political participation and eliminating gender disparities in the field of education, workforce participation and the likes can be considered as measures for empowering women. Empowerment is multidimensional with economic, cognitive, social and political aspects (Hanmer and Klugman, 2016). The process of transferring elements of power such as capabilities, resources and power to those who lack them can be referred to as political empowerment (Budryte, 2014). The global political empowerment of women is defined as 'the enhancement of assets, capabilities, and achievements of women to gain equality to men in influencing and exercising political authority worldwide' (Alexander et al. 2016: 433). A positive association between political empowerment of women and the labour market opportunities for women is proven, therefore, political empowerment is a powerful policy tool for improving the economic participation of women in India (Ghani, et. al., 2013). Moreover, it is viewed that women politicians endorse policies favouring women (Malhotra and Schuler, 2005) so that political empowerment and participation of women in governance and decision making expedite the process of attaining gender equality.

In developing countries, poor people find it easier to achieve desired results when they pool in all their resources and act collectively. Ibrahim (2006), names it as collective capabilities, and defines it as the newly generated functioning bundles a person obtains by virtue of his/her engagement in a collectivity that help her/him achieve the life he/she has reasons to value. In other words, these are choices acquired by participants of a group on account of their participation in it. Although individual actions may bring in positive social changes in the society, collective actions and collective agency have proved to be beneficial for the poor in bringing about sustainable social and political changes. Therefore, this idea is constantly being used in developing countries to reinforce human capabilities.

The advantages of organising women into consciousness-raising groups have been discussed widely in the 1960s during Women Liberty Movement that challenged male supremacy by adopting a Pro-Woman line by refusing to blame the individual woman for her oppression (Hansich, 1969). The slogan raised in this movement, "the Personal is Political", is still relevant as feminists believe whether or not their problems seemed irrelevant to those around them, the solution must be sought through collective action. In Kerala, as a poverty

eradication and women empowerment programme implemented by the State Government, Kudumbashree enables women to collectivise them, and this movement derives its strength from its participants' unity to seek a political solution for their problems. If empowerment can be conceptualized in terms of resources, agency and achievements as pointed out by Naila Kabeer (1999), Kudumbashree provides all these three essentials to help its participants to improve their quality of life. This movement plays an important role in empowering women across Kerala, expanding their socio-economic and political capabilities, enabling them to make independent choices, and encouraging them to follow their own course of actions independently with self-confidence. Devika and Thampy (2012:199) noted 'women's gentle power' and 'knowledge of rules' are two important factors which determine their success in politics.' If that holds good, Kudumbashree provides them ample opportunities to enhance their *knowledge of rules regarding* different procedures of the Panchayat and trains them to exercise their power in a more convincing and authoritative manner. Therefore, Kudumbashree could be seen as 'institutions' from where future women leaders could pick up the basics of political processes through participatory methods and also the lessons of handling power relations within an institution. As a state-initiated program implemented in the context of devolution of powers to PRIs and People's Plan Campaign, convergence with PRIs is the central theme of Kudumbashree. Under the ministry of Local Self Government, PRIs and Kudumbashree work together through institutional and programmatic convergence and resource sharing as well. With a three-tier system; Neighborhood Groups (NHG) at primary level, Area Development Societies (ADS) at ward level and Community Development Societies (CDS) at PRI level, Kudumbashree works in a local self-government (<https://www.kudumbashreenro.org/>). Through this study, the researchers prove that the constant interaction between two invited spaces Kudumbashree (a state-sponsored space for improving women's empowerment) and reservation in PRIs (another state-sponsored space to improve women's political presence) have the capacity to deliver an 'invented' space wherein women can nurture their political dreams further. One has to take into account the highly politicized social space in Kerala as the state has a strong legacy of organized politics, too.

Methodology

The study adopted a mixed-method design known as 'embedded design' in which one data set provides a supportive secondary role in a study based primarily on the other data type (Creswell, Plano Clark, et al., 2003). With a transformative worldview, it discussed underlying causes of women's exclusion from the political field and identified this as a discriminative practice against them and, it proposed ways and means to ensure their integration into the mainstream by exploring their lived experiences². Since any single set of data is not sufficient to explore the lived experiences of the respondents, we embedded a quantitative component as well within a qualitative framework in

such a way that one completes the other data set. We collected both quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously during the period from February 2018 to June 2019 in Kottayam district.

Kottayam district consists of 11 blocks and six municipalities. Since this study was intended to look into the lived experiences of elected women panchayat members, the researchers purposely eliminated municipalities and randomly selected one panchayat from each block. Then all the elected women representatives³ were identified as respondents and this formed the basis of the sample. Out of a total of 93 respondents, 59 were with Kudumbashree background and the rest 34 were without Kudumbashree. Two sets of interview schedules were used to conduct in-depth individual interviews. In addition, participant observation and focus group discussions (FGDs) were also employed to make the data richer and inclusive and the details of which are given in Table 1. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of the respondents. Journals, books, census report and the internet were used as secondary sources. The internet is a different genre of source since it is the only non-linear source and thereby, a host of responses have come up and in the absence of any new methodology. On studying the internet sources, a tentative application of the existing social science research methodologies is adopted.

Table 1 The Sample: Kudumbashree Vs non-Kudumbashree

Panchayat	Block	Number of Respondents with Kudumbashree	Number of Respondents without Kudumbashree	If FGD (Focus Group Discussion) conducted
Elikkulam	Pampady	3	6	Yes
Kallara	Kaduthuruthy	6	1	
Karukachal	Vazhoor	6	2	
Meenachil	Lalam	4	4	Yes*
Neendoor	Ettumanoor	6	2	
Paippadu	Madapally	8	1	
Parathod	Kanjirappally	6	4	Yes*
Puthupally	Pallam	6	4	Yes*
T.V Puram	Vaikkom	7	2	
Teekoy	Erattupetta	3	4	Yes*
Uzhavoor	Uzhavoor	4	4	Yes
Total	11	59	34	

Source: fieldwork data

* In these panchayats 2 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted. In addition to the FGDs with elected representatives, another with either Kudumbashree members or with women elected representatives alone was conducted. The number of participants in FGDs varied from 10 to 15, including the researcher in FGDs with both male and female elected members. The number of participants in those FGDs with either women members or Kudumbashree members ranged from 6 to 8.

Theoretical Framework

This study employed the person-in-environment (PIE) theory, which argues that an individual is the product of his/her environment whose problems

and issues can be identified by analyzing his/her environment. Hare (2004) and Weiss-Gal (2008) assert that the person-in-environment approach views the individual and his or her multiple environments as a dynamic, interactive system, in which each component simultaneously affects and is affected by others. The impact of environmental influences in one's upbringing lasts forever, and it reflects on each of his/her 'choices' they make later in their lives as well. This theory also recognizes and respects an individual's ability to solve his/her problems if he/she has been given ample opportunities later in their lives to compensate for all those missed or lost ones in the past. In addition, this theory elucidates, effecting socio-political reforms to remove structural obstacles faced by an individual or a group of individuals, which has the capacity to enhance their ability to realize their potentials fully. Keeping this in mind, the researchers analyzed how women are being sidelined by denying them opportunities to get integrated into society during their growing up years, how self-help groups (SHGs) can be of help in compensating for all those missed opportunities, furthermore, how reforms like reservation laws bring in gender equality in politics.

Profile of the Study Area

Kerala, popularly known as God's Own Country, is located in the southern peninsula of India. The state is famous among the world tourists for its serene backwaters and scenic beauty. However, among the socio-economic scientists around the world, Kerala is famous for its development model. The state came into existence on 1st November 1956 as a result of the State Reorganization Act. As per the 2011 Census, it consists of 14 districts, 63 taluks, 520 towns and 1018 villages. The total population is 3,34,06,061 out of which 1,73,78,649 are females. Kerala has the highest sex ratio in India, which are 1084 females per 1000 males according to 2011 Census of India. Kerala is well known for its higher socio-economic development indicators like high literacy, high life expectancy and a high standard of living, despite having lower per capita income. However, its failure to address increasing suicide rates, alcoholism and cancer among its general population has attracted a fair amount of criticism from the rest of the country. Apart from this, its well-educated youth's preference to work abroad and increased life expectancy has created a massive jump in the average age of the population.

This study was conducted in Kottayam District of Kerala, which achieved 100% literacy in 1989. As per the Census 2011, the district has a population of 1,974,551 out of which 1,006,262 are females. This district has a mix of religious groups comprising of 49.81% of Hindus, 43.48% of Christians and 6.41% of Muslims along with other religious minorities. This district has 6 Municipalities, 1 District Panchayat, 11 block panchayats and 71 Grama Panchayats.

Data analysis and Major Findings

To differentiate the performance of respondents with and without

Kudumbashree exposure, the total number of respondents (93) has been divided into two groups, viz; exposure to Kudumbashree and without exposure to Kudumbashree. Fifty-nine of them had exposure to Kudumbashree and the rest 34 women had no Kudumbashree exposure prior to their political entry (Table 1). One of the key informants from TV Puram panchayat candidly elucidated, *'Kudumbashree women are always ready to come out of their shell and to mingle easily with the common public. Earlier, it was hard to convince an ordinary woman without much political connection to contest in an election unless her husband is an active party worker. Kudumbashree made our hunt for right candidates much easier'* (Member, T.V Puram), which proves that in the case of a Kudumbashree woman the decision to contest evolves with a lesser effort by party members unlike the ones without the Kudumbashree exposure.

In Table 2, more than 30% from Kudumbashree group proudly 'owned up' their decision to enter into politics, against the other group's 11.8%. From the responses, it was clear that a good number of respondents (52.9%) from the non-Kudumbashree group had entered into this field out of compulsion from either family members or party leaders. Besides, the second group has 14.7% of respondents who had been inducted into politics as replacements of their family members. At the same time, no one from Kudumbashree claimed that they had been chosen as direct replacements. Furthermore, the data (Table 3) indicates that the number of women contesting in general seats is not so great either. Still, there is a reality that Kudumbashree can be proud of, out of eight respondents who contested in general seats, six were members of the Kudumbashree mission. From these observations, it is obvious that Kudumbashree experienced women entrants exhibit a strong willingness to venture into the political sphere without being compelled.

Table 2 Nature of your Decision to contest

Response	With Kudumbashree		Without Kudumbashree	
	Frequency	Per cent	Frequency	Per cent
Own decision	18	30.5	4	11.8
Compelled by someone	19	32.2	18	52.9
Political decision	22	37.3	7	20.6
As a direct replacement for your spouse/father due to women reservation	0	0.0	5.0	14.7
Total	59	100.0	34	100

Source: Fieldwork data

This study reveals a preference of women with young children and older women to stay away from politics, irrespective of their Kudumbashree background. Out of the total sample, there existed a dismal 19.3% of respondents below 40 years of age and 7.3% above 61 years of age. Having school going children at home prevented most of the young mothers from being active in the socio-political arena, while the 61 plus age group pointed to their ailing

health as the excuse. Therefore, this study perceives women 'above 41 and below 60 years' who have grown-up children and enjoy better health as the most active ones. While Kudumbashree has 74.58% of them, the other group has 70.59% emphasizing women's general tendency to be active in the socio-political arena during their middle years, and up to the late fifties. Excerpts from the interview with a young mother who was feeling guilty of leaving behind her young daughters to go to Panchayat explains the reason for the rarity of young mothers in this field, '*many people around look down on me saying that I am just a ward member, not a Prime minister. In fact, the last three years have been a nightmare as I get very little or no time to help my daughters in their studies and their personal matters*' (Maneesha, Non-Kudumbashree group).

In the total sample, 49.46% were Christians, 48.39% were Hindus, and 2.15% were Muslims. Since the caste system plays a dominant role in determining one's status in society, we looked into the composition of different castes in the total sample. The majority in the total sample (60%) belonged to the general category, followed by 38.7% of SC/ST/OBCs. The overall educational status of the respondents presents an optimistic figure, as there were none without basic literacy skills. In the total sample, 30% were with high school education, 31% were intermediates, 35.48% were graduates, and 3% were post-graduates. Considering the employment status, 43% of the total respondents were homemakers, 35.48 % were employed, and 21.5% were self-employed. Among the respondents, there were four Asha⁴ workers and an NREGA⁵ worker as well. When it comes to the family type, the percentage of respondents from the joint family slightly exceeded the nuclear family. This may indicate women's tendency to be active in the political sphere if they have supportive families at home. Economic status also plays an important role in determining one's social status and power in society. It is observed that, with or without Kudumbashree, candidates above the poverty line had a strong presence, as they constitute 69.89% of the total sample.

Liberation of the Invisible Women

Pointing out the bi-directional relationship between economic development and women's empowerment, Duflo (2012) says, it enables women to access the constituents of development such as health, education, earning opportunities, rights and political participation easily. Financial independence is considered as a 'prerequisite' for women's liberation and the importance of which is echoed around the world by feminists during the second wave of feminism and they urged women to have a purse of their own (Hanisch, 1969). Recognizing this, the Kudumbashree mission encourages its members to be financially independent. Seventy percentage (70%) of the respondents, who had no 'own source of income' prior to their Kudumbashree exposure expressed that they used to feel ashamed of their financial dependency and on account of

which they refrained from spending money on their personal needs, which proves that financial dependence cripples the wings of women's ambitions. Therefore, a majority of them embraced the idea of Kudumbashree wholeheartedly as it provided them with an opportunity to encash their skills, by running small-scale business units like tailoring shops, tea stalls, soap manufacturing units, organic farming and the like with loans availed from their respective Kudumbashree units. This does not mean that they are making a huge amount of income through such activities, but they are making just enough to keep the private moneylenders who charge exorbitant interest rates at bay. In some cases, a mere thought itself of having an option to avail a loan as and when needed is a huge relief for them. Not so surprisingly, a majority from the non-Kudumbashree group and 30% of Kudumbashree were seemingly glad to play second fiddle in their families, and they believed it was necessary to embrace established notions of marriage like the '*sanctity*' of marriage and the '*stability*' of the family. Therefore, what is an insider's perception of women's status and role is the need to maintain the family and also balance the political role produces an altered subjectivity. The question of whether this is an unfinished agenda is dependent on contingent factors and as family and values are the important factors for women, the sense of satisfaction has to be accepted with these pre-qualifications.

Women's collective failure to organize themselves as a political group which could exert pressure on government bodies effectively in 'creating new spaces, occupying existing spaces or revalorizing negatively labelled spaces' (Price-Chalita, 1994:239) had definitely acted as a deterrent in their quest to be politically empowered. When they were given spaces of participation in the form of mandatory reservation, they started occupying such spaces but without "conviction" and a large number of them still believe and behave as if they are under the mercy of men. However, a good percentage of those with Kudumbashree exposure expressed their regret for not utilizing all those opportunities effectively in the past to improve their status in general and their political foothold in particular. For example, women belonging to the privileged class showed a tendency to be more submissive and propagated patriarchal values as compared to ordinary women who were less educated, as a majority of the non-Kudumbashree group (91.2%), agreed to the statement '*though I had freedom, I preferred to go along with the family's political choice*' against Kudumbashree's 64.4%. This also ties up with the assertion of male dominance by proxy through women. Therefore, it can be safely assumed that Kudumbashree is somehow inspiring its participants to 'unlearn' the 'learned' helplessness and thus to get rid of their "submissive" attitude by enabling them to recognize what was wrong with their previous lives, invoking 'regrets' about all those missed opportunities now and encouraging them to look out for new opportunities.

Women's political invisibility has been a matter of concern among

modern-day political experts. This study discusses how Panchayati Raj Act and the Kudumbashree mission together made a difference upon women's minimal presence in PRIs, ousting women's ethnocentric tendency to remain with subordinate group identities merely as voters and not taking up any roles in politics, besides the neglect by political parties. While analyzing individual, social and political aspects of their lives before starting out as public servants, it is found that 60% of the respondents with Kudumbashree and 80% of the respondents without Kudumbashree had never been approached by any political party or group previously with an opportunity. Ninety per cent of women members were not even exposed to campus-level politics. In fact, the passage of Panchayati Raj bill had placed 'women' right in the centre of the political spectrum and its transformative effects started appearing in all walks of their lives. Numerically speaking, women's presence had been doubled or tripled in all PRIs (they either equalled or outnumbered men) after increasing the reservation limit up to 50%, and in the present study, 8.6% of the total sample had won from general seats against male opponents. A sharp increase in the women elected representatives in panchayats led to an increased surge in the number of women willing to take up leadership positions at the party level. In other words, their representation in PRIs made women confident to take up party leadership roles. An excerpt from a key-informant interview reveals an issue within this, *'women have a tendency to label party work as a "headache" and an "unnecessary" liability in addition to their household duties.... Now the situation is improved as many of them are willing to take up party positions as well. But whenever their term ended in the panchayat, they discontinue their party work'* (Secretary, District Congress Committee, Kottayam).

This study illustrates Kudumbashree's role in providing an opening to freshers into politics as 81.4% of respondents were new entrants in this field, keeping aside a negligible percentage of its members who explained that Kudumbashree background did nothing with their candidature as they or their family members had political connections. Above that, Kudumbashree is facilitating the political entry of women who belonged to lower socio-economic category. While Kudumbashree brought in 50.8% of SC/ST/OBC women to Panchayat level politics, only 14.7% of such women came through non-Kudumbashree route. This has opened a new route for entrants into politics, and as the vote share of the political parties are already consolidated in Kerala, there is a need to now look into this new set of players within the respective political loyalties.

While analyzing the educational status of respondents, non-Kudumbashree group had better-educated members. In fact, critiques of the Kudumbashree mission allege that Kudumbashree paves the way for uneducated women into politics, which may adversely affect the quality of their participation. However, the findings of this study suggest otherwise - of those respondents with higher education within the Kudumbashree group,

70% was leading an active social life even before entering into politics as Kudumbashree members, while 40% from the other group remained as homemakers prior to their political entry. Setting aside the rationale of critics, one of the key informants explained that as long as the Kudumbashree mission brings in leaders who are hardworking and genuinely interested in public service, people will not judge them negatively.

Second Chance for Women

For a woman, the decision to contest in an election itself is a huge life-changing one that has ramifications in different aspects of her life. This study brings out some interesting observations regarding the Kudumbashree mission's role in grooming its participants into seasoned politicians in a very short time span. Kudumbashree sends a substantial number of women into politics armed with skills that are either newly picked up or polished through its activities. As discussed earlier, most of the women get negligible political exposure during their younger days which is said to be very crucial if they ever want to be strong-willed politicians later. When it comes to Kudumbashree's role in compensating for those missed opportunities, it can be seen that as members of Kudumbashree, they were given ample opportunities to deliver public speeches (78% of them claimed that they had never been exposed to public speaking until they joined Kudumbashree), to face the public, to organize and campaign for social changes (about 80% said, through Kudumbashree they developed awareness regarding unjust and uncivilized practices in society), to participate in debates and group discussions targeting women's empowerment including Gram Sabha meetings (80% of them started attending it regularly, and 68% of them started raising issues pertaining to women and children after joining Kudumbashree). For example, almost everyone either strongly agreed or agreed that they have indeed improved their knowledge regarding rights and duties as citizens through attending various classes hosted by their respective Kudumbashree groups. Besides, the Kudumbashree group has the maximum number of respondents who had participated in socio-political movements, and a substantial 83% agreed that Kudumbashree exposed them to different point of views rather than the biased versions presented to them by their husbands since it comprised of participants from diverse backgrounds. Moreover, a majority (88.1%) believed that they were handling conflicts better than the ones in the non-Kudumbashree group who usually look towards their husbands or party elders for 'easy noiseless solutions'. Kudumbashree's ability to provide 'apprenticeship' to 'aspiring elected representatives' has been pointed out by many respondents, especially those who had worked alongside with their previous ward members to conduct Gram Sabha meetings as this experience had come in handy for them when they were asked to conduct such meetings after becoming elected representatives.

A significant difference, in the percentage of respondents with some kind of exposure with leadership roles before their induction into Panchayats, is also noted between the two groups. While the Kudumbashree group has 67.8% of such cases, the latter has its majority (61.8%) without any exposure to leadership positions. When a woman enters into the unknown territory of public service, she comes in with a label of someone's wife/daughter/sister and she carries it for a long period of time. However, in the case of Kudumbashree empowered ones, there appears a difference as they are getting chances to remain in the memory of the public by undertaking surveys and health awareness campaigns on behalf of Panchayats.

The story of 'transformation' cannot be completed without mentioning Kudumbashree's ability to provide a 'second chance' to all those women who had to confine themselves within the four walls of their houses due to various circumstances. If child care responsibilities kept some of them away from being active in the socio-political arena, for many others, it is lack of freedom and other restrictions. However, with the inception of Kudumbashree, a great number of them found themselves in the midst of society actively working for change. Because of its close association with the local panchayats, even those who had conservative values let their women work with Kudumbashree. Easy availability of loans and rumours like the government may give away 'freebies' through Kudumbashree further increased its acceptance among the general public. However, the fact remains that even if someone enters into this field reluctantly, her journey with Kudumbashree could be beneficial to her ability to earn more and to be active in the socio-political arena. Not only this, this study brings forth evidence to prove that those who come up through Kudumbashree, experienced a sudden elevation in their social status compared to the other group which primarily has more educated, employed women from well-to-do families. This untapped political space has a mobility effect that seeks to entrench the democratic process, but it is not known about its longevity as it restricts the recruitment of new entrants, as this space is a limited one.

To examine Kudumbashree's ability to create bold and fearless leaders, this research analyzed factors such as their ability to withstand pressure from the party cadre and the extent of their family's involvement in their official matters. The results are described in Table 4. When it comes to familial influence, majority of women discuss proceedings of the Panchayat committee with their immediate family members irrespective of their Kudumbashree exposure. However, the percentage of respondents who refrained from seeking direct advice from their family members on matters related to Panchayat is 25.4% in the Kudumbashree group and 15% in the non-Kudumbashree group. This result also ties up with the socialization in the Kudumbashree as the levels of different types of exposure enables them to deal with a crisis. In the case of their ability to resist political pressure as well, members of Kudumbashree group present better indicators suggesting they are indeed

bolder than the non-Kudumbashree group in certain aspects.

Moreover, when asked if they would accept the party chief's decisions without fact-checking, a significant number of the non-Kudumbashree group had agreed with the statement. Therefore, it must be safe to presume that Kudumbashree empowers women to be stronger and fearless to a certain extent. Interestingly, Kudumbashree empowered respondents showed more confidence to contest in general seats while non-Kudumbashree preferred to stick on to contesting for seats allotted to them (Table 3).

Table 3: If the respondent was elected from a seat reserved for women

Reserved	With Kudumbashree		Without Kudumbashree	
	Frequency	Per cent	Frequency	Per cent
Yes	53	89.8	32	94.1
No	6	10.2	2	5.9
Total	59	100.0	34	100.0

Source; fieldwork data

Table 4: Involvement of Family and Party

Statements	With Kudumbashree						Without Kudumbashree				
	SD	D	NO	A	SA	Total	SD	D	NO	A	SA
Discuss happenings in the panchayat at home	0	25.4	0	50.8	23.7	100	0	15	0	35.3	50
I seek father's/ spouse' opinion	0	45.8	1.7	45.8	6.8	100	0	35	0	32.4	32.4
I've no opinions that contradicts party's view	24	40.7	5.1	23.7	6.8	100	14.7	38	2.9	23.5	20.6
I will compromise with the party if I have to	10	32.2	13.6	37.3	6.8	100	2.9	18	26.5	20.6	32.4

Source: Fieldwork data: From optimistic Strongly Disagree to pessimistic Strongly Agree the options were given on a five-point scale.

This study reveals the plight of those respondents who entered into the panchayat level politics without Kudumbashree due to their sudden and unplanned entry. In fact, some of them had to replace their spouses/one of the parents due to reservation. A great majority among them (88%) revealed that they had very little or absolutely no knowledge of the functioning of the panchayats when they joined for the first time and some of them were 'clueless' when they were asked to conduct Gram Sabha in their wards, as they had never attended such meetings prior to their election. The data further suggests

that non-Kudumbashree members suffered mainly from their lack of experience with the leadership roles, difficulty in public speaking and unfamiliarity with the routine affairs of the Panchayat. However, they managed pretty well with the popularity of their 'surnames' or their 'house names' along with the strong political backing.

When it comes to women's desire to hang on to political power, apart from a few, the rest had been not in favour of extending this career further, citing various issues like ageing parents, family commitments, health issues and the need for making way for the younger generation. Interestingly, one of the respondents even quoted a Malayalam proverb '*it is always better to stop singing when your voice is still beautiful and young*' to say extending this career may end up as a damp squib. However, a good number of respondents from the Kudumbashree group preferred to be active in the socio-political arena after the end of their current term while 44.1% of the non-Kudumbashree group preferred to go back to their previous lives after their current term. Maitrayee Chaudhuri's (2004:121) argument that the 'effect of women's organizations to seek redressal for problems of women brought home the point that social changes cannot be brought about without concomitant political changes' gives us a deeper insight into this pattern.

The Unbreakable Patriarchal Ceiling

Kudumbashree mission surely has contributed towards empowering women and has been hailed as a path-breaking effort that helped lakhs of low-income families out of poverty. However, the question that arises here is, how successful has it been when it comes to keeping the evil effects of patriarchy at bay? Has it done enough to rout out women's subconscious belief that they are subsidiaries to men in all spheres of life, and especially in the political sphere?

The findings of this study do not indicate that Kudumbashree is capable of preparing women to occupy such spaces created for citizen participation with utmost confidence and a sense of ownership, as long as there are some women who believe contesting in the general seat is a 'grave' mistake against 'men'. A response from one of those reveals the same, '*this (50% reservation) itself is great, there is no need for a woman to contest in a general seat unless she has been told to do so by the party*' (Sini, Kudumbashree group). Shockingly, there are 64.4% of respondents within the Kudumbashree group who concur with the statement, '*though I have the freedom I preferred to go along with family's political choice*'. Though they painted a much better picture in this regard compared to the non-Kudumbashree group, still they have a long way to go. From the data, it is clear that Kudumbashree has invoked a 'regret' among its participants regarding underutilization of their freedom that was theirs, and has aided them to swim against the tide, but it has failed to encourage them to ponder on such 'invisible' barriers and thus, to set themselves free of the ill effects of the patriarchy.

Though Kudumbashree *re-defined* the way rural women approach financial matters, there were 27.1% who have not used their freedom to manage their finances as they believed doing so will be against their 'culture' and 'traditions' and another 20% who had no freedom to manage their finances, confirms this organization has still a long way to go to uproot patriarchy. To the dismay of Kudumbashree supporters, its ability to produce women leaders with strong independent political views also remains questionable as the data suggests if one decides to contest, she prefers a party in which her husband or father is a member.

A few of them even equated their decision to work with Kudumbashree as their "second birth" as it gave them 'a break' from their otherwise monotonous routine but their refusal to challenge the age-old traditions, keeping them behind the man took away some shine off its glory. For example, the percentage of women who vouched they would not utilize their freedom, to spend money without taking permission from their husbands, is as high as 27.1% in the Kudumbashree group. From this, it is clear that, though Kudumbashree expands certain capabilities of its participants, the extent of their activeness/vigour is still regulated by the existing gender norms in society.

Apart from this, many have pointed out that Kudumbashree - a place where a series of discussions are supposed to happen aimed at liberating women from the clutches of patriarchy has now been relegated into a forum where members talk only about credit and thrift activities. Since thought provocative discussions are essential to develop 'conscientization' or 'critical consciousness' about their secondary status, it would be plausible, that this organization failed to address the root cause of the problem in the absence of such sessions.

Among the Kudumbashree group, the percentage of financially dependent women who believed in the traditional role definition of a patriarchal family comes around 30% which means a significant number of them still believe their role is to make sure that their family's affairs are on track while their spouses earn their livelihood. For them, preserving the familiar roles in marriage is far more appealing than ascertaining their rightful power and agency over the 'mighty' gender. The data again supports the existence of a significant number of women who preferred not to use their 'improved status' as an excuse to run away from their domestic duties and responsibilities. From the data collected to check if Kudumbashree makes women fearless, it is observed that irrespective of their Kudumbashree exposure, a significant number of women still needed validation from an immediate male relative in their family. Even if they do not take up their male relatives' viewpoints on official matters blindly - thanks to the better socio-economic indicators of Kerala - they agreed that they would happily discuss every aspect of their decisions with them.

Except for a negligible few, the participants are in favour of conforming to existing social and gender roles and wished to complete their term 'risk-

free'. Since choosing defiance (adopting behaviours which are deemed inappropriate for a female politician) is a risky tactic (Beauvoir, 1949) and also considered as something which could 'devalue' themselves socially, they preferred to keep a low profile. Interestingly, a majority of them believed, if they do not conform to the stereotype of 'conventional' women politicians, the people will rout them out in the next election. When it comes to a woman's conduct within the home, if she behaves like someone with power and authority especially after becoming an elected representative, she may face allegations of being arrogant and someone who overpowers her husband. In certain cases, women who previously had the freedom to make decisions have decided not to use it anymore fearing of branding them as being 'pompous' and 'bossy'. Even women with Kudumbashree background failed to make an impression under this category, as there are respondents who believed their political future remains with their husbands' consent. And this research found no evidence to suggest that Kudumbashree experienced women might remain in politics for a longer period. In fact, women's tendency to make mediocre success as 'great' is found to be a major deterrent in extending their political career. It substantiates the classical patriarchal practices of households that define and limit women's choices by shaping the unconscious aspect of their gendered subjectivity in the socialization stages of their life (Kandiyoti, 1988).

As a pioneer programme whose primary target was to empower poor women by making them self-sufficient, Kudumbashree somehow failed in liberating women from being the propagators of patriarchy. The organization which was initially put together to give women a space where they could think, talk and do things differently and independently without being mere dependents of their male relatives, however, turned a blind eye towards their plight to attain 'equality' in every sense. Unfortunately, our data confirms women's tendency to utilize the political authority in such a way that it syncs in with their subordinate status in society. Therefore, this study also supports the observation of Megarry (2014) quoted by Glynn et al. (2015:1114) about the ideals of femininity promoted within Kudumbashree, *'for the increased 'voice' it provides to women is accompanied by their expected adherence to conservative norms of upholding family values and giving service to their community'*.

Conclusion

An analogy between women members of panchayats in Kottayam district of Kerala, with and without Kudumbashree support corroborates the advancement of this program towards its objectives of women empowerment by introducing them to diverse realms of society equipped with essential skills to prosper. Kudumbashree raises its participants as dominant beneficiaries of women reservation in PRIs by ushering them into politics, especially women from the lower socio-economic strata. As a key player in bringing forth women into politics Kudumbashree prepares its participants to maintain a better

connection with grassroots and to handle political pressures more effectively compared to the other group. By instilling behavioural changes in women, this program transforms them into good organizers and public speakers. However, the culturally conditioned attitude of women keeping patriarchy intact, dissuades them benefitting the possibilities Kudumbashree provides to level up their status with male counterparts.

Irrespective of its progress in disseminating feminist ideologies among the rural population, a well thought out programme like Kudumbashree, which is exclusively designed to challenge the evil effects of patriarchy, failed to arrest the furtherance of the patriarchal mindset, sustained over the centuries. From not claiming their rightful share in the political leadership to refusing to make use of their agency in a manner that challenges traditional power relations within their family and the community, the evidence of their betrayal to the larger cause of women's liberation can be seen throughout the study. Even if a woman's Kudumbashree involvement has been pointed out as one of the main reasons to be recognized by the top party leadership as a potential candidate, this study found no evidence to suggest that Kudumbashree empowered ones preferred to stay back in political limelight for a longer period. While Kudumbashree envisages making independent and bold women, its participants still hold on to the traditional views of women as caretakers of their families and conform to the roles traditionally assigned to them. They restrict their own freedom by spending any extra income they earn, towards the betterment of their families rather than spending towards their personal necessities. It reiterates the need for conscientization of women further to redirect them towards attaining equal status with men demolishing patriarchy. Kudumbashree has tapped on a new space and equipped politically competent women with networks into successful roles at a later age but within the large rubric of the dominant discourse that is normative and socially sanctioned. This discourse is unwritten but flows through culturally and is silently accepted by all constituents. Exposure to Kudumbashree helps them to develop a critical perspective on the happenings around them. However, they let patriarchy govern their ability to make use of their newly developed skills and confidence.

Notes

1. Kudumbashree - A programme initiated by the Kerala government in 1998 to eradicate rural poverty by organizing women into neighbourhood groups.
2. Lived experiences - personal experiences of a person, including the wisdom they have gained from such experiences.
3. Elected after the civic polls held in 2015 for a five-year term.
4. Asha worker- Accredited Social Health Activist
5. NREGA- National Rural Employment Guarantee Act

References

Alexander, A. C. *et al.*

- 2016 "Defining Women's Global Political Empowerment: Theories and Evidence", *Sociology Compass*, Vol. 10, No. 6, pp. 432–441.

Beauvoir, Simone De.

- 2011 (1949). *The Second Sex*. Borde and Chavellier, (Trans.), London: Vintage, Random House.

Budryte, Dovile.

- 2014 "Political Empowerment", in A.C. Michalos (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being Research*. Dordrecht: Springer. 4876–4879

Chaudhuri, Maitrayee.

- 2004 *Feminism in India*. New Delhi: Women Unlimited.

Creswell *et al.*

- 2003 "Advance Mixed Methods Research Designs". In Tashakkori, A., & Teddlie, C. (eds.) *Handbook on Mixed Methods in the Behavioral and Social Sciences*. CA: Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications, pp. 209-240.

Devika, J., and Thampy, B.

- 2012 *New Lamps for Old*. New Delhi: Zubaan.

Duflo, Esther.

- 2012 "Women Empowerment and Economic Development", *Journal of Economic Literature*, Vol. 50, No. 4, pp. 1051–1079.

Ghani, Ejaz *et al.*

- 2013 "Can political empowerment help economic empowerment? Women leaders and female labor force participation in India", Policy Research Working Paper Series 6675, The World Bank.

Glynn, W., Devika, J., and Aandahl

- 2015 "Making Space for Women in Urban Governance? Leadership and claims making in a Kerala Slum", *Environment and Planning*, Vol. 47, pp. 1113–1131.

Hanmer, L., and Klugman, J.

- 2016 "Exploring women's agency and empowerment in developing countries: Where do we stand?", *Feminist Economics*, Vol. 22, No. 1, pp. 237-263.

Hanisch, Carol.

1969. "The Personal Is Political" Introduction, 2006 <https://webhome.cs.uvic.ca/~mserra/AttachedFiles/PersonalPolitical.pdf> Access: 12/26/2019 10:34

- Hare, Isadora.
2004 "Defining Social Work for the 21st Century; The International Federation of Social Workers' Revised Definition of Social Work", *International Social Work* , Vol. 47, pp. 407-424.
- Ibrahim, S.S.
2006 "From Individual to Collective Capabilities: The Capability Approach as a conceptual Framework for Self-help", *Journal of Human Development*, Vol. 7, No. 3, pp. 397-416.
- Kabeer, Naila.
1999 "The Conditions and Consequences of Choice: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment", UNRISD Discussion Paper No. 108. August 1999.
- Kandiyoti, Deniz.
1988 "Bargaining with Patriarchy", *Gender & Society*, Vol. 2, No. 3, pp. 274-290.
- Malhotra, A., and Schuler, S. R.
2005 "Women's empowerment as a variable in international development". In D. Narayan (ed.) *Measuring Empowerment: Cross-disciplinary Perspectives*. Washington, D.C.: The World Bank.71- 88
- Megarry, K.
2014 "From the Kitchen to the Stage: Women Negotiating Empowering Spaces through Self-Help Groups in Kerala", Department of Geography, King's College London, unpublished PhD.
- Nussbaum, M. C.
2001 *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Vol. 3). Cambridge University Press.
- Nussbaum, M. C.
2011 *Creating Capabilities*. Harvard University Press.
- Price-Chalita, P.
1994 "Spatial Metaphor and the Politics of Empowerment: Mapping a Place for Feminism and Postmodernism in Geography", *Antipode*. 26(3). 236-254.
- Sen, Amartya.
1999. *Development as Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Sen, Amartya.
1984 *Collective Choice and Social Welfare* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: (1970)
- Weiss-Gal, Idit.
2008. "The Person-in-Environment Approach: Professional Ideology and Practice of Social Workers in Israel", *Social Work*. Vol. 53, pp 65-75.

Census report

2011 <http://www.census2011.co.in/census/district/280-kottayam.html>

Kudumbashree: Govt of Kerala <http://www.kudumbashree.org> OR, <https://www.kudumbashreenro.org/>

RECEIVED: 27TH FEB 2020

REVISED: 10TH Nov 2021

ACCEPTED: 28ND Nov 2021



This document was created with the Win2PDF "print to PDF" printer available at <http://www.win2pdf.com>

This version of Win2PDF 10 is for evaluation and non-commercial use only.

This page will not be added after purchasing Win2PDF.

<http://www.win2pdf.com/purchase/>