

DEMOCRATIC DECENTRALIZATION & POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN: AN ANALYSIS OF KERALA EXPERIENCE

By

***Nitheesh S. Babu, **Hari Krishnan, R., ***Vishnu, M. S.**

**Research Scholar, PG & Research Department of Economics,
Fatima Mata National College, (Autonomous) Kollam, Kerala, India.*

***Research Scholar, PG & Research Department of Political Science,
NSS Hindu College, Changanacherry, Kottayam, Kerala, India.*

****Research Scholar, PG & Research Department of Economics,
Mar Thoma College Pathanamthitta, Kerala, India.*

Abstract

Decentralisation is the process by which the authority and functions of federal as well as state governments are delivered to local self-governing organisations. When we analyse the context of the Kerala economy, Kerala witnessed a paradoxical situation with participation in the labour force and parliamentary seats occupied by the female are very low. Decentralisation significantly contributes to women's advancement in political as well as economic realms. The data from the State Election Commission reveals that there is a gradual rise in the participation of women in Local self-government elections from 2010 to 2020. In Kerala, decentralisation is fundamental for the political growth of women.

Keywords: *decentralisation, women empowerment, local self-governments, grama panchayat, block panchayat, district panchayat, municipality, municipal corporations, and kudumbasree.*

Introduction

Decentralised planning is a style of planning in which local institutions and organisations create, approve, carry out, and oversee the plan without intervention from the central authority (Kerala state planning board report, 2022). Decentralisation means transfer

of power by Central and State Governments to the local government. The core thought of decentralisation is that an enormous quantity of questions and problems can be solved solely at the local level. It is also more accessible to individuals to be involved in the decision-making process directly

at the local level. The constitutional amendment Act in 1992 take several steps to create three tier government system in a most efficient way. One-third of the positions are earmarked for women, as well as reservations for underprivileged groups.

Kerala's socioeconomic and demographic metrics, like as its low infant mortality rate, long life expectancy, and high literacy rate, demonstrate its strength. Kerala is one of India's expanding states with a high GSDP and GSDP per capita. Kerala has the lowest Multidimensional Poverty Index score of 0.002, according to NITI Aayog's Multidimensional Poverty Index 2023 (Kerala Economic review 2024).

Decentralisation is crucial for comprehensive development and inclusive expansion of Kerala Economy. Kerala has led the way in decentralised and participatory development, and the model is well liked both domestically and abroad. (Kerala Economic review 2024).

Decentralisation in Kerala refers to the state's democratic devolution of power, finance & function to the local

self-government institutions through a multi-tier panchayat system, initiated peoples plan campaign. The fundamental element is the village council, also known as the Grama panchayat, which is elected by the people. At the block level, there is a block council; at the district level, there is a zilla parishad or district council. The main aim of decentralisation is that power to power less. The Kerala's decentralised governance model is a highly influential one, prompting by the GOI to ask all states to prepare a Grama panchayat Development Plan (GPDP). However, the GOI's version is limited to address the core issues of transferring real resources, power, and staff to local self-governments, which was the defining nature of Kerala's original people's plan campaign (Kerala Economic review 2024).

Peoples plan campaign was launched in Kerala on August 17, 1996 by the Left democratic front government EK Nayanar, aimed to democratize planning by devolving 35-40% of state plan funds to local self-governments for the grassroot development. One of the main objective of peoples plan campaign is the women empowerment

and growth of underprivileged group of the society.

Decentralisation in Kerala has significantly contributed to women empowerment, particularly through strengthening of local self-government institutions and the female participation in judgement process. A 50% reservation for women in Panchayats and local bodies is mandated under Kerala state law. (Chitra & Siva Kumar, 2022). Kerala model of decentralisation has enabled grassroots participation, allowing women to actively engage in grassroots governance and development strategy. In fact, among the Indian states, Kerala is well impressive in human development achievements. The indices of maternal mortality rate, birth rates, and the percentage of women with secondary education are noteworthy in Kerala's economy when it comes to the components of the Gender Inequality Index (GII). However, the percentage of women holding parliamentary seats and their engagement in the employment market are extremely low, indicating that they are below the national average (Selvi, et al 2017). As a result, Kerala's economy is faced with

a paradoxical situation that combines low performance and inequality in terms of economic and political participation with great successes and equality in the areas of health and education. This research tries to evaluate how decentralisation promotes the political empowerment of women in Kerala.

Literature Review

Desai and Thakkar (2007) in their research, they looked at women's education, legal rights, and political participation are the major ways of women empowerment.

Williams et al. (2011) investigated the role of the Kudumbashree program in decentralised planning. "Sree" denotes prosperity, and "Kudumba" indicates family. In terms of literacy, skill development, and economic, social, and political empowerment, Kudumasree works with women to close the gender gap. Kudumbasree uplift the condition of women in different aspects. Through this neighbourhood organization, women are seen as grassroots catalysts for local development (NHG). The study found that it significantly affected the

reduction of poverty and women's public visibility.

Chithradevi (2012) conducted a study on women empowerment in self-help group in component of rural Chennai. The primary concern examined that the SHG members are predominantly from economically disadvantaged background and they are striving for expanding their economic activities.

Research Objectives

To evaluate the contribution of Local Self Governance on political empowerment of women in Kerala Economy

Research Methodology

The basis for this investigation is secondary data. Secondary data was gathered from a variety of government publications, including the Kerala Economic Review, NSSO reports, Election Commission papers, websites, essays, journals, and NGOs. This detailed piece illustrates trend women participate in different LSGIs.

Significance of the Study

The eleventh plan period (2007-2012) announced that the reservation for

adult females in Local Self Governments increased from 30% to 50%. Kerala founded a strong women empowerment with Kerala's model of decentralization. This research looks into the extent of women participation in Kerala's local bodies. So, it is crucial to evaluate the role of decentralization in women empowerment and how decentralization promotes women in their different aspects of life.

Types & Forms of Decentralisation

There are three important types of decentralization.

a) Political Decentralization: It implies the handover of power to make decisions from the highest level of government to lower governmental levels. Its main goal is to increase local level engagement.

b) Administrative Decentralization: It can be highlighted as the distribution of administrative power from the national government to local offices. Deconcentration and delegation are the two fundamental kinds of administrative decentralisation. Delegation refers to granting

authority to semi-independent entities, whereas deconcentration refers to distributing the workload inside the central government office.

- c) Fiscal Decentralisation:** It means giving the financial powers to the local self-governments in order to raise revenue in the form of tax and spend funds.

Women’s Health Profile - A comparison with Nation

In Kerala, women's health metrics are often better than men's. Kerala has the

highest life expectancy for women in India at 76.9% at birth. At 67.7 years, life expectancy is much greater than the national average. According to data released by the RGI in December 2013, India's maternal death rate for 2010–12 was 178 / 1,00,000 live births. Kerala's corresponding rate is far lower, at 66 per 1,000,000 live births. The following data shows different indicators regarding the health status of women & also make a comparison with national scenario.

Table 1. Women’s Health Status

| Indicator | Women’s health status in Kerala | Women’s health status in India |
|--------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|
| Death rate | 6 | 6.4 |
| Infant mortality rate | 13 | 42 |
| Maternal mortality rate | 66 | 178 |
| Life expectancy at birth | 76.9 | 67.7 |

Source: Directorate of Health services, 2013

Women Empowerment

Increasing the ability of an individual or an entire group's social, political, spiritual, educational, or economic strength is usually referred to as

empowerment. Women empowerment is not a new word; it is under the discussion of all over the world. In its basic form it refers to the establishment of an atmosphere in

which women are empowered to make autonomous decisions for their personal growth and to shine as equals in society.

Eight millennium goals were proposed by the UNDP to ensure global peace and fairness. The empowerment of women in India is intimately tied to the third MDG. In the background of the Indian economy, the Ministry of Women and Child Development was founded in 1985 as a division of the Ministry of Human Resource

Development with the goal of advancing the comprehensive growth of the nation's women and children.

In Kerala economy sex ratio is favour to women and it is 1084/1000 (census report 2011). So, it is very important for strengthening women and achieve inclusive growth and development of Kerala. The decentralisation promotes women upliftment in different aspects, while this study examines the political enhancement of women.

Table 2. Shows the involvement of women as the result of decentralization

| Local Body Type | 1995 | 2015 |
|------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| Grama Panchayat | 990 | 941 |
| Block Panchayat | 152 | 152 |
| District Panchayat | 14 | 14 |
| Municipality | 55 | 87 |
| Municipal Corporation | 3 | 6 |

Table 2. Source: Local Self Government Department (LSGD), GOK The Panchayati Raj Act of 2005 , Kerala one of many states in India grants 50 percentage of the seats in local self -

government are reserved for women. It promotes inclusive growth and women upliftment in the Kerala Economy. The scope for women's involvement in politics and administration has been

greatly increased by this Act. It provides a safe platform for women to speak up & be heard. Out of 6 municipal corporations 3 of the

mayors were women (2020 election). The following data shows the involvement of women as the result of decentralisation.

Table 3. Women Representation in Local Self Government in 2002

| Institutions | Women belong to indigenous communities | Aggregate Women |
|---------------------|---|------------------------|
| Grama Panchayath | 103 | 8360 |
| Block Panchayath | 11 | 1102 |
| District Panchayath | 2 | 168 |
| Total | 116 | 9630 |

Table 3. Source: Basic statistics of Panchayati Raj institutions, ministry of Panchayati raj in 2019 GOK

In 2002, the representation of women in local self-government institutions in

Kerala was significant. The total women members are 9630, it shows 52.42% of total strength. Out of 9630, 116 members are tribal women's.

Table 4. Representation of Women from 2010-2020

| Sl.No. | Year | Total Participation | Total No. Women Participation | Percentage of Women Participation |
|---------------|-------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------------|--|
| 1 | 2010 | 21607 | 11443 | 51.9596 |
| 2 | 2015 | 21803 | 11837 | 54.2906 |
| 3 | 2020 | 21847 | 11965 | 54.7672 |

Source: Staff election commission

In 2025 Local self-government election, 16589 women members are participated from Kudumbashree. It means out of total women

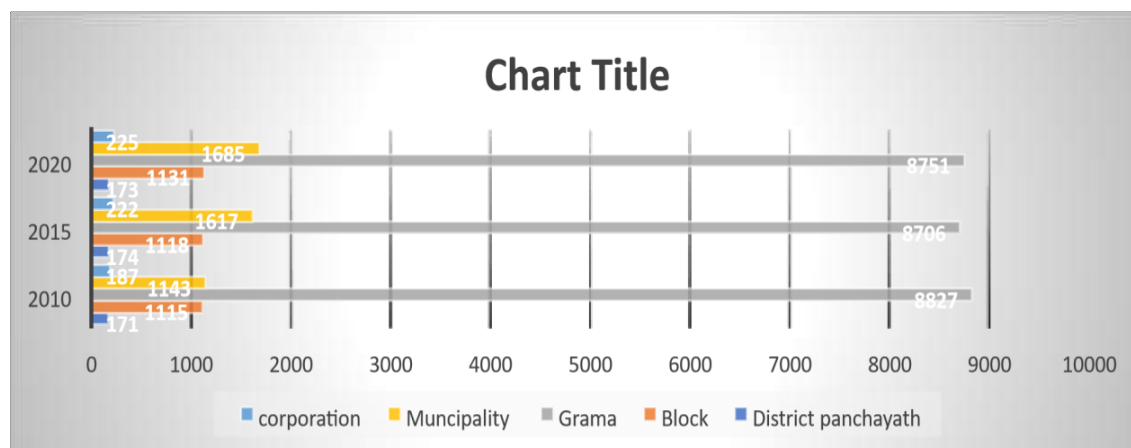
participation 42% are from KDS. It elevates women's status and gives them greater voice in society.

Table 5. Women participation in different types of LSGI's

| Year | Corporation | Municipality | Grama Panchayath | Block Panchayath | District Panchayath | Total |
|------|-------------|--------------|------------------|------------------|---------------------|-------|
| 2010 | 171 | 1143 | 8827 | 1115 | 187 | 11443 |
| 2015 | 173 | 1617 | 8706 | 1118 | 222 | 11836 |
| 2020 | 225 | 1685 | 8751 | 1131 | 173 | 11965 |

Source: Official website of GOK, LSGD

Fig 1. Women's involvement in different Local self-government institutions



Role of Kudumbasree in women political participation

Surprisingly Kudumbasree was started in April 1999 and opened its doors in

May 1998, it wasn't completely operationalised until 2003. The KDS is a women-centric anti-poverty venture that Kerala has successfully executed.

Kudumbasree was implemented on the basis of SHG model. The SHG enhances the role of women and increase their participation and also helped in developing leadership quality, duty

consciousness and self -confidence etc. The below table shows the status of women participation in LSGI from Kudumbasree in General election 2010.

Table 6. Status of women participation in LSGI from Kudumbasree in General election 2010

| Level | Total Women's Participation |
|---------------------|-----------------------------|
| Grama Panchayath | 4796 |
| Block Panchayath | 304 |
| District Panchayath | 34 |
| Municipality | 334 |
| Corporation | 15 |
| Total | 5485 |

Table 6. Women participation in LSGI from Kudumbasree in General election 2010, SEC

With the promotion of Kudumbasree under SHG model, 5485 women members were participated in the 2010 LSGI election. Women believe that Kudumbasree was the inspiring variable in women's development and it is the easiest way to entering public life for them. In 2025 Local self-government election, 16589 women members are participated from

Kudumbashree. It means out of total women participation 42% are from KDS. Out of these 7210 women were elected for their local self-governing bodies.

Statistics of women members of Kerala Legislative Assembly

140 elected legislators constitute the Kerala legislative assembly. In 1957, 50.64% of the total electorate were women and 49.36% were men. But in 2011, 52.1% were women and 47.9%

for men. The highest representation was in 1996, with 13 women members.

This data depicts that in the post 2000 period, maximum number of women are elected in 2021. 2021 has the top number of women ministers since the establishment of the Kerala state in 1956. Out of 12, 3 women members constitute minister position for the first time of Kerala's political history.

Elected Women in Lok Sabha – A comparison with National scenario

It is quite surprising the when we analysing the parliament scenario, the position of women in the state is comparatively weaker as compared to the national average and the numerous Indian states In 2009 10.7% of total number of seats which means that out of 543 seats women constitutes 58 seats, where as in Kerala out of 20 seats 0% for women. In 2014 11.5% of elected in Lok Sabha on all India level, where as in Kerala it is 5%

Findings

- Adult female engagement in local self-governance institutions has gone up dramatically as an outcome of decentralised structures. Through reservation

and participatory framework, it fosters grassroots involvement and establishes a formalised space. However, the reality in higher political bodies notably parliament and state legislative assembly, where women's representation is quite low, contradicts this development and reflects a persisting disparity in political inclusion across all levels of governance.

Suggestions

- The government guarantees an adequate presence of women in each official institutions.
- Create entry points for the women in participating state and national level politics.
- Family constitutes a fundamental element for women empowerment
- Most women's are unaware about the functioning of KDS in women empowerment so arranging interactive session with other empowered women's.
- Government take measures to bridge the gap of technologically illiterate women's.
- Form SHG should be changed as a mixture of upper class and lower -

class women's, it promotes National integration.

- To attract more women's to KDS by providing medical benefits, pension etc
- Boost KDS's initiatives by offering audiovisual resources and media, such as radio and television.

Conclusion

Decentralisation in Kerala has significantly advanced women empowerment through initiatives like KDS. This program promotes the grass root participation and increases the

women participation in local body seats and fostering SHGs that build leadership and economic independence. Despite of progress there are so challenges faced now a days. The involvement of women was only high in local body level. They face several issues like lack of family support, lack of training, disparity in women community groups etc. To conclude Kerala model of decentralization is highly appreciable and the government take initiative to solve the disempowerment factors.

References

Anitha, P., & Amma, K. P. S. (2019). Analysis of the structure and economic activities of self help groups under bank linkage programme in the state of Kerala. *International Journal of Research and Review*, 6(7), 270–282.

State Election Commission, Kerala. (n.d.). *State Election Commission, Kerala*. <https://sec.kerala.gov.in/>

Chathukulam, J., & John, M. S. (2000). Empowerment of women panchayat members: Learning

from Kerala (India). *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, 6(4), 66–101.

Chathukulam, J., & John, M. S. (2002). Five years of participatory planning in Kerala: Rhetoric and reality. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 37(49), 4917–4926.

Government of Kerala, Local Self-Government Department. (n.d.). *Local Self-Government Department, Kerala*. <https://lsgkerala.gov.in/>

Government of Kerala, State Planning Board. (2024). *Economic Review 2024*. <https://spb.kerala.gov.in/economic-review/ER2024/>

Kerala State Planning Board. (2024). *Economic review 2024*.

Hari, K. S. (2022). Role of democratic decentralisation and empowerment of local bodies: A case of Kerala. *Review of Market Integration*, 14(1), 53–63. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09749292221102220>

Kudumbashree. (n.d.). *Kudumbashree: Kerala State Poverty Eradication Mission*. <https://www.kudumbashree.org/>

Kudumbashree Story. (n.d.). *Decentralisation and Peoples' Plan Campaign – Setting the context*. <https://kudumbashreestory.in/index.php/kudumbashreeandlsg/convergenceidea/setting-thecontext>

Special Correspondent. (2021, November 28). Now, Kudumba

shree Mission forms auxiliary groups to empower young women. *The Hindu*. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Kochi/nowkudumbashreemissionforauxiliary-groups-toempoweryoungwomen/article37737349.e>

State Planning Board, Kerala. (2022). *Working Group Report on Decentralised Planning Process (Fourteenth Five-Year Plan 2022–2027)*. Kerala State Planning Board. <https://spb.kerala.gov.in/sites/default/files/inlinefiles/Working%20Group%20Report%20on%20Decentralised%20Planning%20Process.pdf>

Chitra, A. P., & Sivakumar, K. (2022). Women empowerment through Panchayath Raj Institutions: A case study among tribal women ward members in Kasaragod District, Kerala. *Journal of Kerala Studies*, 49, 49–61. <https://jihku.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/JKS4.pdf>

To cite this article

Nitheesh S. Babu, Hari Krishnan, R., & Vishnu, M., S. (2026). Democratic Decentralization & Political Empowerment of Women: An Analysis of Kerala Experience. *John Foundation Journal of EduSpark*, 8(1), 1-13.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Nitheesh S. Babu is a Research scholar in the PG & Research Department of Economics in Fatima Mata National College (Autonomous), Kollam, affiliated to the University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. He secured first rank in M.A Economics at FMN College, Kollam (2024) and was awarded the Chief Minister's student Excellence Award in the year 2023 for his academic excellence. His academic interests lie in Labour economics, especially modern labour market dynamics like the gig economy, development economics and decentralised governance with special reference to the Kerala Economy



Hari Krishnan R is a Research scholar in the PG & Research Department of Political Science at NSS Hindu College, Changanacherry, affiliated to Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, Kerala, India. His research interest areas are Environmental Governance, Decentralisation, and the Constitution



Vishnu M. S. is a Research Scholar in the PG and Research Department of Economics at Mar Thoma College, Tiruvalla, affiliated with Mahatma Gandhi University, Kerala, India. His areas of academic interest include sustainable development, tourism, Environmental Economics, and decentralisation.
