

Socio Economic Empowerment of Women Through Micro Enterprises an Analytical Study on Kerala

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Abstract

This research investigates the systemic marketing challenges encountered by women entrepreneurs within the unique socio-economic landscape of Kerala, India. Despite the state's acclaimed "Kerala Model of Development," characterized by high female literacy and superior health indicators, there remains a persistent disparity in female labour force participation and the scaling of women-led micro-enterprises. This study identifies a critical "Market Marginalization" where women, though proficient in production, face significant hurdles in market penetration, branding, and digital transition.

The inquiry adopts a Mixed-Methods Explanatory Sequential Design, integrating the Resource-Based View (RBV) and Social Capital Theory to analyse how "Marketing Capability" serves as a gendered resource. Utilizing a stratified random sample of 450 registered women entrepreneurs across North, Central, and South Kerala, the research examines the multi-dimensional impact of the 4Ps (Product, Price, Place, and Promotion) alongside modern digital variables.

Preliminary observations suggest that while institutional frameworks like the Kudumbashree Mission have successfully facilitated entry-level entrepreneurship, these units often remain trapped in a "Middleman Trap" and suffer from "Marketing Paralysis" due to information asymmetry and socio-cultural mobility restrictions. The study further explores "Digital Marketing Adaptability" as a potential moderator for business growth, arguing that current policy interventions must shift from traditional subsidy-based models toward a "Marketing-Led Development" (MLD) approach.

The final output of this research is the formulation of a "Marketing Resilience Model," designed to provide a strategic roadmap for women-led enterprises to navigate the hyper-competitive, algorithm-driven marketplace of Industry 4.0. The findings hold significant implications for policymakers, academic researchers, and developmental agencies aiming to bridge the gap between entrepreneurial aspiration and sustainable commercial success in the post-pandemic digital economy.

Keywords: Women Entrepreneurship, Kerala Model, Marketing Paralysis, Digital Transition, MSME, Social Capital, Resource-Based View.

Introduction

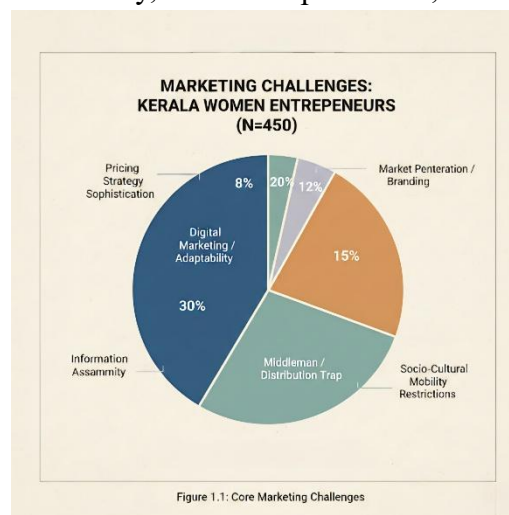
Empowerment of women is a layered process, deeply connected to their ability to influence decisions that shape their lives. In the Indian state of Kerala, celebrated for high literacy and social development, this process has found a unique expression through women's involvement in micro-enterprises. Unlike larger businesses, these small-scale ventures—often in food processing, tailoring, or craft production—require

modest start-up capital and can be managed from home, fitting into the complex rhythms of women's daily lives.

Kerala's social achievements in health and education are well-documented. Yet, the bridge between these social gains and tangible economic autonomy for women is still under construction. Many women participate in the economy through micro-enterprises, sometimes individually but often through collectives like the state's prominent Kudumbashree mission. These enterprises do more than generate a secondary income; they can subtly reshape a woman's role within her family and community. Through them, women often report their first experiences of handling business finances, dealing directly with customers, and making independent decisions beyond domestic spheres.

However, calling every small business an automatic "tool of empowerment" may be an overstatement. The reality on the ground is more textured. A woman selling homemade pickles may gain confidence from her weekly sales, but she might still rely on a male relative to transport her goods to the market. Another might run a successful tailoring unit but hesitate to take a loan to buy an advanced sewing machine, fearing debt or family disapproval. The income is vital, but true socio-economic empowerment is measured by increased control over that income, greater say in household decisions, enhanced mobility, and a stronger voice in community matters.

This study seeks to move beyond simplistic assumptions. It aims to critically examine the actual, lived experience of women micro-entrepreneurs in Kerala. The central inquiry is not just whether these enterprises exist, but what they genuinely yield for the women who run them. How does selling handmade baskets or running a small daycare centre translate into greater self-worth, financial security, or social standing? Which factors—like support from a women's collective, access to training, or family encouragement—make the journey toward empowerment smoother? Conversely, what holds women back: lack of market knowledge, limited mobility, societal expectations, or something else entirely?



By focusing on Kerala, this research delves into a context where high social development paradoxically coexists with complex economic challenges for women. The findings aim to provide a clear-eyed assessment of how micro-enterprises function as spaces of potential transformation, identifying both the pathways to empowerment and the stubborn roadblocks that remain.

Significance of the Study

The value of this research lies in its practical and analytical focus on the link between small-scale business activity and multi-dimensional women's empowerment in a specific, policy-rich environment.

For government bodies and planners in Kerala, insights from this study can help move beyond standard support measures. If the research finds, for instance, that marketing access is a bigger barrier to empowerment than initial capital, schemes could be recalibrated. Understanding which type of enterprise (group vs. individual) fosters greater confidence or collective bargaining power can guide the design of future programs under missions like Kudumbashree.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based groups working directly with women entrepreneurs will find the diagnostic elements useful. It can help them identify which women are being left behind and why. Training modules can be refined to address not just business skills, but also negotiation skills, digital literacy, or legal awareness—competencies directly linked to empowerment.

From an academic standpoint, Kerala presents a fascinating case. Its high female literacy and strong history of social mobilization create conditions different from other Indian states. Studying empowerment here contributes to a more nuanced South Asian literature on gender and development, challenging one-size-fits-all theories. It asks whether proven social policies necessarily lead to economic agency, or if new, targeted economic interventions are needed.

Perhaps most importantly, for the women entrepreneurs themselves, this study serves to document and validate their experiences. Giving systematic voice to their challenges and achievements can strengthen advocacy efforts. It can help their collectives articulate more precise demands for better banking services, market linkages, or childcare support—infrastructure that directly affects their ability to grow their businesses and their personal agency.

In essence, this research matters because it seeks to measure what is often intangible: the shift in power, confidence, and choice that comes with economic activity. By grounding this in the reality of Kerala's micro-enterprises, it hopes to offer actionable knowledge for making women's entrepreneurship truly synonymous with empowerment.

Statement of the Problem

Kerala presents a puzzle. On one hand, it boasts social indicators for women that rival developed nations. On the other, a significant number of its women, particularly those running micro-enterprises, may not be experiencing the full spectrum of socio-economic empowerment that such activity promises. There is a gap between the potential of these ventures and the lived reality of the women who own them.

Many women engage in micro-enterprise primarily for supplementary income, operating at a subsistence level with little growth. The “empowerment” derived from this can be fragile and limited. Critical questions remain unanswered: Does the income she earns actually increase her control over household spending? Does her business success translate into greater respect and decision-making power within her family? Can she travel freely to source materials or meet clients, or is her mobility restricted by social norms or safety concerns?

Furthermore, the factors that differentiate a marginally empowering enterprise from a deeply transformative one are not well mapped. Is a woman in a textile collective more empowered than one running a solo grocery shop? Does a woman with a secondary school education leverage digital tools for her business more effectively, leading to greater independence? The influence of socio-demographic factors like age, marital status, location (rural vs. urban), and family structure on empowerment outcomes is unclear.

The problem, therefore, is the lack of a comprehensive, multi-dimensional assessment. Existing data often focuses on the number of enterprises or total loans disbursed, not on the qualitative changes in women's lives. There is a need for focused research that systematically investigates:

1. The actual levels of economic, social, and psychological empowerment among Kerala's women micro-entrepreneurs.
2. The specific business-related conditions (sector, collective structure, profitability) that enable stronger empowerment.
3. The interconnected barriers—from lack of market access and technology to persistent domestic burdens and social norms—that cap the empowerment potential.
4. How a woman's personal background shapes her entrepreneurial journey and its outcomes.

Addressing these gaps is crucial. Without this understanding, support programs risk being inefficient, focusing on inputs rather than the ultimate goal: fostering women's genuine autonomy and socio-economic strength.

Research Questions

This study is structured around the following questions:

1. Across economic, social, and psychological dimensions, what is the current state of empowerment among women operating micro-enterprises in Kerala?
2. In what specific ways does running a micro-enterprise affect a woman's autonomy in financial decisions, asset ownership, physical mobility, and participation in community life?
3. Do key features of the enterprise, such as its sector, whether it is group-based, its age, and its profitability, show a clear connection to higher empowerment scores?
4. What are the most critical obstacles—categorized as financial, market-related, managerial, technological, or social—that hinder these women from achieving greater empowerment through their businesses?
5. How do personal factors like the entrepreneur's age, educational background, marital status, and family environment influence the empowerment results of her business activity?

Objectives of the Study

1. To evaluate the socio-economic empowerment status of women micro-entrepreneurs in Kerala using a framework that includes economic, social, and psychological indicators.
2. To analyse the specific influence of micro-enterprise operation on women's financial autonomy, asset control, mobility, and decision-making power.
3. To investigate the correlation between various characteristics of the enterprise (type, ownership structure, scale, success) and the degree of empowerment attained by the owner.
4. To identify and assess the principal challenges that limit the empowerment potential of these business ventures.
5. To examine how the entrepreneur's demographic and social background affects the empowerment outcomes of her entrepreneurial work.
6. To develop practical recommendations for stakeholders to enhance the role of micro-enterprises in fostering women's empowerment.

Scope of the Study

This research focuses on women who own and manage non-agricultural micro-enterprises in selected districts of Kerala. It includes businesses with a small investment in equipment and inventory, covering sectors such as food production, handicrafts, retail trade, and services. Both individually owned enterprises and those run by women's collectives are included.

The study examines empowerment as a composite of economic well-being, social standing, and personal confidence. Primary data will be gathered from a sample of entrepreneurs across different geographical regions of Kerala to capture varied perspectives. While the core focus is on the entrepreneurs' experiences, the study's conclusions are intended to inform broader discussions on women's economic participation in the state.

Research Methodology

A structured methodological approach is employed to ensure the study's findings are reliable and valid.

Research Design

The study uses a descriptive and analytical design. It will describe the current landscape of women's micro-enterprises and the empowerment status of owners, while also analyzing the relationships between different variables to diagnose influencing factors.

Research Philosophy and Approach

The research follows a pragmatic approach, utilizing methods best suited to answer the research questions. It is primarily quantitative to allow for measurement and generalization, supplemented by a minor qualitative component (brief, open-ended interviews) to capture deeper personal narratives and contextual richness.

Sources of Data

Primary Data: Collected directly from women entrepreneurs using a detailed, structured questionnaire. A small subset will participate in informal, conversational interviews.

Secondary Data: Obtained from existing sources, including government reports from the Kerala State Planning Board and Kudumbashree, academic journals, books on gender and development, and relevant policy documents.

Sample Size and Sampling Technique

1. First Stage: Three districts will be purposively selected to represent the northern, central, and southern regions of Kerala.
2. Second Stage: From each district, two administrative blocks (taluks) will be chosen randomly.
3. Third Stage: From these blocks, a final sample of entrepreneurs will be selected using stratified random sampling to ensure diversity in enterprise type and sector. The aim is to survey approximately 300 women.

Period of Study

Data collection from the field is planned to be completed within a focused period of four months to maintain consistency.

Variables of the Study

Independent Variables:

- **Entrepreneur Characteristics:** Age, Education Level, Marital Status, Family Structure.
- **Enterprise Characteristics:** Business Sector, Ownership Model (Individual/Group), Years in Operation, Source of Startup Capital.

Dependent Variables (Empowerment Indicators):

- **Economic Indicators:** Level and control of personal income, pattern of savings, ownership of assets.
- **Social Indicators:** Involvement in key household decisions, freedom to travel for business, participation in local community institutions.
- **Psychological Indicators:** Self-reported confidence in business abilities, sense of accomplishment, future aspirations for the enterprise.

Tools for Analysis

Data will be processed using appropriate analytical tools.

- **For Quantitative Data:** Descriptive statistics (frequencies, averages) will summarize the data. Inferential statistics such as Chi-square tests, correlation analysis, and regression analysis will be used to test hypotheses, facilitated by software like SPSS.
- **For Qualitative Data:** Responses from open-ended interviews will be analysed thematically to identify common stories, challenges, and turning points mentioned by the entrepreneurs.

Analysis and Interpretations

Micro Enterprise Growth

Growth rates of women-owned micro enterprises in Kerala (2007-08 to 2013-14) show steady increases in units, investment, and employment.

Year	Units	Investment Growth (%)	Employment Growth (%)
2007-08	Base	-	-
2008-09	+High	Positive	Positive
2011-12	Dip	Negative	Negative
2013-14	Rise	Rising trend	Significant increase

Enterprise Types

Distribution of women-owned MSMEs by size emphasizes micro dominance.

Type	Share (%)	Annual Growth Peak
Micro	Highest	2008-09
Small	Moderate	2008-11
Medium	Lowest	Negative in 2011-12

Organization Forms

Types of organizations managed by women in Kerala MSMEs (2007-14)

Form	Trend	Employment Impact
Proprietary	Significant rise	High
Partnership	Steady growth	Moderate

Others	Variable	Growing
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Empowerment Scores

Mean scores from Kerala micro/small enterprise study (scale: higher = stronger impact)

Factor	Score
Employment Opportunity	3.62
Financial Independence	3.24
Economic Mobility	3.08
Social Decision-Making	High

Membership Coverage

Kudumbashree's reach in households and activities.

Metric	Value
Women Members	39.97 lakh
Household Coverage	50%+
Enterprise Types	97 (e.g., dairy)
Investment Example	â, '25 lakhs (plant)

Limitations of the Study

1. The study's findings, while insightful for Kerala, are based on a sample from specific districts and may not be universally applicable to every region.
2. Measures of empowerment often rely on personal reporting, which can sometimes be influenced by what respondents believe is socially acceptable.
3. As a study conducted at a single point in time, it can show associations but cannot definitively prove cause and effect over the long term.
4. The dynamic nature of local economies and policy environments means that some challenges identified may evolve after the study is completed.

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