

Perceived Effectiveness of Women-Friendly Projects and Perceptions of Gender Roles among Women Elected Representatives of Local Self-Government Institutions in Thiruvananthapuram District, Kerala

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ABSTRACT

Background: In Kerala, local self-governance institutions (LSGIs) are mandated to implement and fund programs aimed at uplifting women's welfare through the Women Component Plan (WCP), which ensures that women occupy 50% of all positions. Although elected women officials play a pivotal role in these programs, their insights and experiences have not been extensively recognized. This study explores the backgrounds of female elected officials, evaluates their opinions on the effectiveness of women-focused initiatives in improving women's social status, and investigates their views on prevalent gender roles in society.

Methods: The research used a cross-sectional exploratory design, surveying 100 women representatives across 28 Grama Panchayats in the Thiruvananthapuram District. Data were collected through structured interviews and analysed using descriptive statistics, as well as various inferential tests like one-way ANOVA, Levene's test, Kruskal–Walli's test, chi-square, Cramér's V, and Spearman's rank correlation, with a significance level of 5%.

Results: The average age of the participants was 44.7 years, with 77% being ward members. A significant majority, 94%, held reserved positions, and 65% were serving their first term. While 67% rated public awareness initiatives positively, only 39% believed the Women Empowerment Scheme effectively elevated women's positions, and merely 27% found wellness centres and training programs for girls beneficial. Notably, 82% attributed the collective movement with promoting equal status and 80% recognized its role in enhancing women's standing, with the Reading Festival identified as the most common literacy initiative under the WCP (83%). Although 94% reported no personal experiences of discrimination locally, 93% claimed they had autonomy in decision-making. Nonetheless, 96% acknowledged the existence of anti-women behaviours, with 73% pointing to problematic public conduct by men, and 53% did not view household responsibilities as shared. Project effectiveness ratings showed no significant variance across different backgrounds (all $p > .05$); however, those with more experience were more likely to identify positive outcomes from collective efforts ($p = .015$). Furthermore, perceptions of societal peace decreased with age and experience (all $p < .001$), and higher effectiveness ratings correlated with the belief that domestic work should be a joint responsibility ($\rho = 0.28$, $p = .005$).

Conclusion: Women representatives appreciate the importance of awareness and community-based initiatives, yet they often perceive welfare-oriented programs as less impactful. There is a widespread acknowledgment of enduring gender stereotypes and anti-female sentiments. These findings indicate a pressing need to recalibrate women-centric projects to focus on dismantling gender norms, advocating for shared domestic responsibilities, and enhancing public safety for women.

Keywords: Women's empowerment; Local governance in Kerala; Women Component Plan (WCP); Female elected officials; Gender perceptions; Public awareness; Program effectiveness

1. INTRODUCTION

In India, the responsibility for fostering gender equality has been directly assigned to local government bodies through decentralized planning. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment of 1992 established the framework for elected panchayats, ensuring that women were allocated at least one-third of the available seats (Government of India, 1992). Kerala has further strengthened these efforts, initiating the People's Plan Campaign in 1996, which allocated a significant portion of planning funds to local bodies, including a mandate that at least 10% of these resources must benefit women through a policy known as the Women Component Plan (WCP) (Isaac & Franke, 2000; Heller et al., 2007). With a further increase in women's reservation to 50% in LSGIs, and backed by Kudumbasree, the state's flagship poverty reduction program built on community women's groups (Devika & Thampi, 2007), numerous initiatives have emerged, including empowerment programs, awareness campaigns, wellness centres, training for girls, and literacy efforts.

Kerala is often commended for its high female literacy rates and favourable health outcomes for women (IIPS, 2021). However, researchers continue to highlight a persistent "gender paradox," where despite these advancements, women remain underrepresented in the workforce and leadership positions, while facing challenges related to violence and restrictive gender norms (Kodoth & Eapen, 2005; Mitra & Singh, 2007). The effectiveness of women-oriented projects in addressing these disparities remains a critical concern. While financial and output data reflect the volume of resources and activities, they do not necessarily indicate whether these efforts have effectively transformed women's social standings.

Elected women representatives in local bodies are ideally positioned to provide valuable insights on this subject as they are involved in selecting and overseeing projects within their wards, directly benefiting from reservation policies, and are integral members of their communities.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Objectives

- O1.** To describe the socio-demographic and political profile of women elected representatives in LSGIs of Thiruvananthapuram District.
- O2.** To evaluate the perceived effectiveness of women-friendly projects – the Women Empowerment Scheme, public-awareness activities, the women's collective movement, wellness centres and girls' training programmes, and WCP literacy initiatives – in improving the status of women.
- O3.** To examine perceptions of gender roles and social behaviour, including domestic violence, anti-women behaviour, discrimination, household responsibilities and decision-making autonomy.

2.2 Hypotheses

H01: Women elected representatives who differ in socio-demographic and political characteristics (age, education, experience in public life, position and electoral term) do not differ significantly in the perceived effectiveness of women-friendly projects.

H02: The socio-demographic and political characteristics of women elected representatives are not significantly associated with their perceptions of gender roles and social behaviour.

H03: The perceived effectiveness of women-friendly projects is not significantly related to perceptions of gender roles and social behaviour.

2.3 Research Design

A cross-sectional design with descriptive and analytical components was adopted. Responses to every item were first summarised for the full sample according to the three objectives. Representatives with different characteristics were then compared, and the link between project assessments and gender-role perceptions were examined in order to test the hypotheses.

2.4 Population and Sample

The population consisted of women elected representatives – Presidents, Vice-Presidents, Standing Committee Chairpersons and Ward Members – serving in the Grama Panchayats of Thiruvananthapuram District in the current term. All representatives in the selected panchayats who were available and consented to take part were included. The final sample numbered 100 respondents drawn from 28 Grama Panchayats across the coastal, midland and eastern hill regions of the district.

2.5 Research Variables

The independent grouping variables were age, education, experience in public life, position and electoral term. Position was divided into office-bearers (President, Vice-President or Standing Committee Chairperson) and ward members, and electoral term into first-term and re-elected members. Three sets of dependent variables were used: (a) the **Perceived Project Effectiveness Score (PPES)**, calculated as the mean of three reverse-scored items on the Women Empowerment Scheme, public awareness, and wellness centres and girls' training programmes (range 1–5, with higher values showing more favourable assessments); (b) the number of collective-movement impacts and of WCP literacy initiatives reported; and (c) nine statements on gender roles and social behaviour, each classified as a positive (gender-equitable) response or otherwise. Summing the positive responses to these nine statements produced the **Gender-Equitable Perception Score (GEPS)**, which ranges from 0 to 9.

2.6 Instrument Development and Measurement

Information was collected with a structured questionnaire that was first drafted in Malayalam and then translated into English. Its 33 questions were grouped into six sections: background information, the social position of women, social change and empowerment, local programmes, gender roles and social behaviour, and personal decision-making. Attitude items offered five ordered response options, from most favourable (code 1) to least favourable (code 5), with a neutral option in the middle. The questions on the collective movement and on WCP literacy initiatives permitted more than one answer and asked respondents to rank their first and second priorities.

2.7 Data Collection Procedure

Interviews were conducted in person, either at LSGI offices or at respondents' homes, once the aims of the study had been explained. Taking part was voluntary, and every participant gave informed consent. Names were deleted prior to analysis. Invalid codes were recorded as missing, and non-response for any item was no higher than 2%.

2.8 Reliability Testing

Table 1: Reliability Testing

Construct	Items	Cronbach's alpha	Interpretation
Perceived Project Effectiveness Score	3	0.495	Low; interpret with caution
Perception of women's status and project effectiveness (combined scale)	9	0.844	Good internal consistency

Internal consistency of the three project items was low ($\alpha = 0.50$), showing that representatives rated the Women Empowerment Scheme, public awareness and wellness centres rather differently. For this reason, the composite score was used only to compare groups, and every item is also presented on its own. When these items were combined with the six items on the status of women, the nine-item scale displayed high reliability ($\alpha = 0.84$) (Cronbach, 1951).

2.9 Statistical Tools and Techniques

Responses were described using frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations, and multiple-response questions were expressed as percentages of respondents. The PPES was compared across groups with one-way ANOVA; homogeneity of variance was checked with Levene's test, and the Kruskal–Walli's test served as a non-parametric confirmation. Kruskal–Wallis tests were also used to compare the numbers of collective-movement impacts and WCP initiatives. Pearson's chi-square test examined associations between respondent characteristics and gender-role perceptions, with Fisher's exact test or a Monte Carlo chi-square test (4,000 permutations) applied when expected counts were small, and Cramér's V was used to express effect size. H03 was tested with Spearman's rank correlation. All hypothesis decisions were taken at the 5% level of significance.

3. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

3.1 Objective 1: Socio-Demographic and Political Profile

Table 2: Socio-Demographic and Political Profile of Respondents (n = 100)

Characteristic	n	%
Age group (mean 44.7 ± 8.7 years)		
≤39 years	29	29.0
40–49 years	41	41.0
≥50 years	30	30.0
Education (mean 11.4 ± 2.1 years)		
Up to SSLC (≤10 years)	38	38.0
Higher secondary (12 years)	34	34.0
Diploma / graduate and above	28	28.0
Position held		
President	6	6.0
Vice-President	13	13.0

Characteristic	n	%
Standing Committee Chairperson	4	4.0
Ward Member	77	77.0
Type of seat (n = 98)		
Reserved for women	92	93.9
General	6	6.1
Times contested		
Once	57	57.0
Twice	31	31.0
Three or four times	12	12.0
Electoral term		
First term	65	65.0
Re-elected	35	35.0
Experience in public life (mean 10.3 ± 6.4 years)		
≤5 years	39	39.0
6–10 years	32	32.0
>10 years	29	29.0

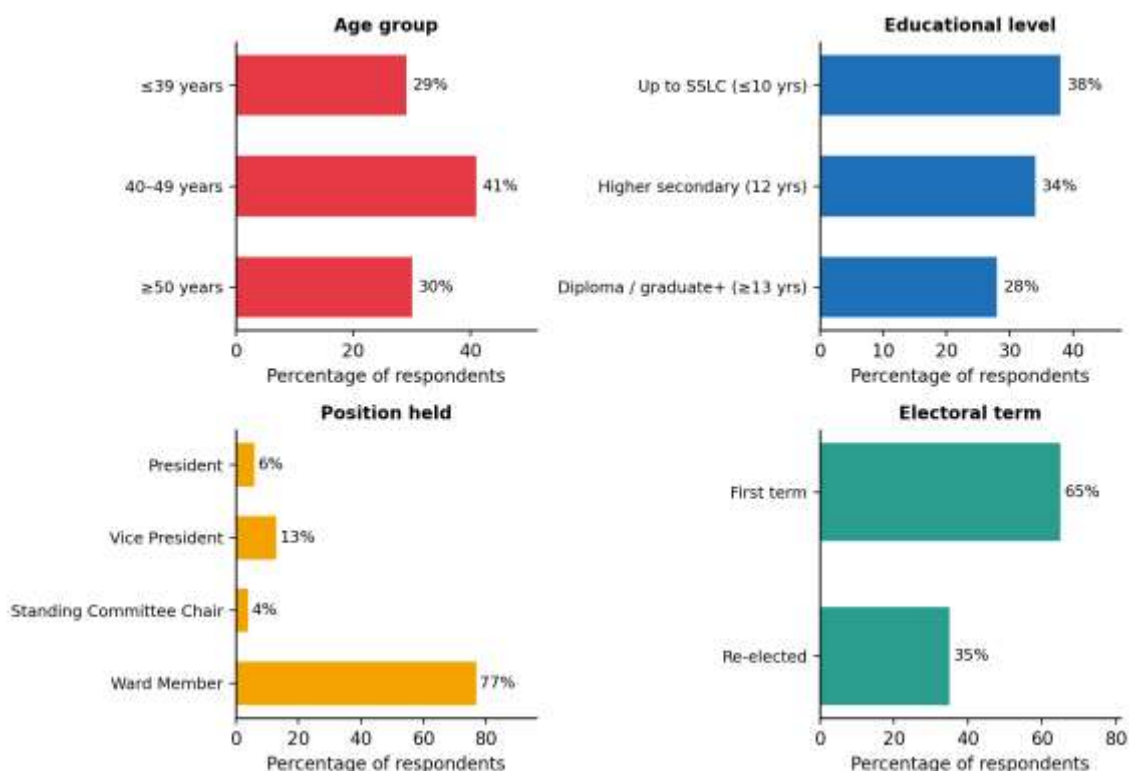


Figure 1: Profile of Women Elected Representatives

Findings

Most respondents were middle-aged, and the largest group (41%) was aged 40–49 years (Table 2, Figure 1). Educational attainment was reasonably high, with 62% having completed higher secondary schooling or above. Ward members accounted for 77% of the sample and office-bearers for 23%. Almost all respondents (94% of valid responses) had been elected from seats reserved for women; 57% had stood for election only once, and 65% were in their first term. Years of experience in public life ranged between 4 and 35. For most representatives, then, reservation had provided the route into local government, and the majority were relatively new to office.

3.2 Objective 2: Perceived Effectiveness of Women-Friendly Projects

Table 3: Statement Analysis of Women-Friendly Project Components (n = 100)

S. No.	Project component	Unfavourable %	Neutral %	Favourable %	Mean	SD
1	Women Empowerment Scheme has improved women's social status	57.00	4.00	39.00	2.770	1.062
2	Public awareness contributes to improving women's condition and status	25.25	8.08	66.67	3.420	0.966
3	Wellness centres and girls' training programmes benefit women	72.00	1.00	27.00	2.530	1.039

Favourable = codes 1–2; unfavourable = codes 4–5. Means are based on reverse-scored items (5 = most favourable). Overall PPES mean = 2.907 ± 0.722 .

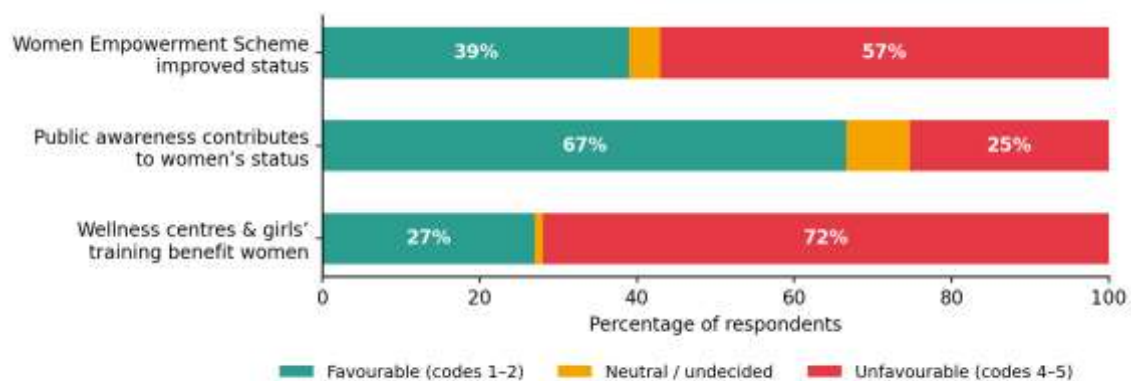


Figure 2: Assessment of Women-Friendly Project Components

Ratings differed considerably from one project component to another (Table 3, Figure 2). Public-awareness activities received the most positive assessment, with 67% agreeing that they helped improve women's condition and status (mean = 3.42). The Women Empowerment Scheme was rated far less positively: only 39% thought it had raised women's social status – and all except one of them described the improvement as slight – whereas 57% saw no improvement at all (mean = 2.77). The least favourable assessment went to wellness centres and girls' training programmes, which 72% said were of no benefit to women (mean = 2.53). At 2.91, the overall project effectiveness score was slightly below the scale midpoint of 3.

Table 4: Impacts of the Women's Collective Movement (Multiple Responses, n = 100)

Impact	Responses (n)	% of respondents
Equal social standing for women	82	82.0
Improved social status of women	80	80.0
Equal rights for women in society	72	72.0
Women entering public spaces	71	71.0
Women entering employment sectors	59	59.0
Improved participation of women in democracy	51	51.0
Improved social relations between men and women	49	49.0
Freedom for women in society	31	31.0
Others	4	4.0

Mean number of impacts reported = 4.99 ± 1.83 . Most frequent first priorities: equal social standing and equal rights (30% each).

Table 5: WCP Literacy and Capacity Initiatives Implemented (Multiple Responses, n = 100)

Initiative	Responses (n)	% of respondents
Reading Festival (Vayanotsavam)	83	83.0
Micro-enterprise support	68	68.0
Self-defence training for girls	63	63.0
Ujjwalini	41	41.0
Vocational skill training	29	29.0
Cradle Song (Tharattu)	26	26.0
Health and nutrition awareness	25	25.0
Chudi Paatam	9	9.0
Legal literacy classes	9	9.0
Digital literacy programme	5	5.0

Mean number of initiatives reported = 3.58 ± 1.06 . Most frequent first priority: Reading Festival (47%); second priority: Ujjwalini (48%).

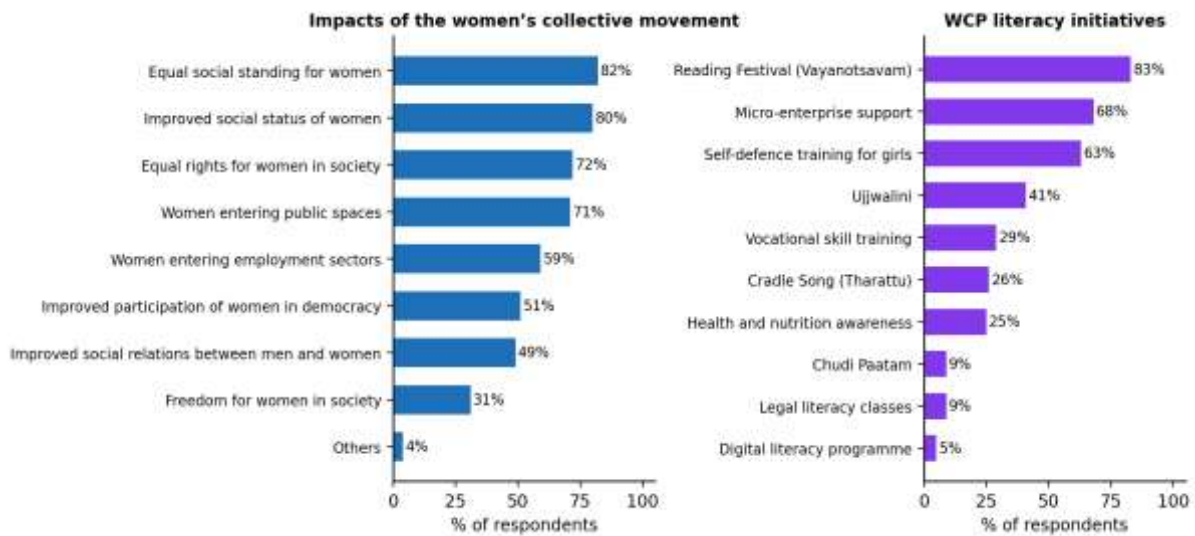


Figure 3: Collective-Movement Impacts and WCP Literacy Initiatives

Findings

Respondents attributed a wide variety of gains to the women's collective movement (Table 4, Figure 3). A majority mentioned equal social standing for women (82%), better social status (80%), equal rights (72%) and women's access to public spaces (71%), and the average respondent named five impacts. Changes of a deeper kind were cited less often, namely better relations between women and men (49%) and freedom for women in society (31%).

The WCP literacy and capacity initiatives implemented most widely were the Reading Festival (83%), support for micro-enterprises (68%) and self-defence training for girls (63%) (Table 5). By contrast, legal literacy classes (9%), Chudi Paatam (9%) and digital literacy programmes (5%) were uncommon. Overall, representatives valued interventions based on awareness and collective action but regarded the welfare-type components – the empowerment scheme and wellness centres – as mostly ineffective, and initiatives on legal rights and digital skills had reached only a small number of panchayats.

3.3 Objective 3: Perceptions of Gender Roles and Social Behaviour

Table 6: Perceptions of Gender Roles and Social Behaviour

S. No.	Statement	Positive response (%)	Neutral / other (%)	Adverse response (%)
1	Domestic violence in the area	Not increased: 71.0	2.0	Increased: 27.0
2	Anti-women behaviour in society	Not prevalent: 4.0	0.0	Prevalent: 96.0
3	Women's role in moral education	Important: 64.0	6.0	Not important: 30.0
4	General behaviour of men in public	Normal: 21.0	6.0	Not normal: 73.0
5	Discrimination against women in the area	No discrimination: 94.0	3.0	Discrimination: 3.0

6	Standing of women's collectives relative to men's groups	Important: 10.0	2.0	Not important: 88.0
7	Household work and childcare	Shared responsibility of men: 40.0	7.0	Not men's responsibility: 53.0
8	Society maintains peace and harmony	Yes: 33.0	1.0	No: 66.0
9	Ability to make own decisions	Able: 93.0	2.0	Not able: 5.0

n = 100 except anti-women behaviour (n = 99). Gender-Equitable Perception Score (0–9): mean = 4.30 ± 1.17.

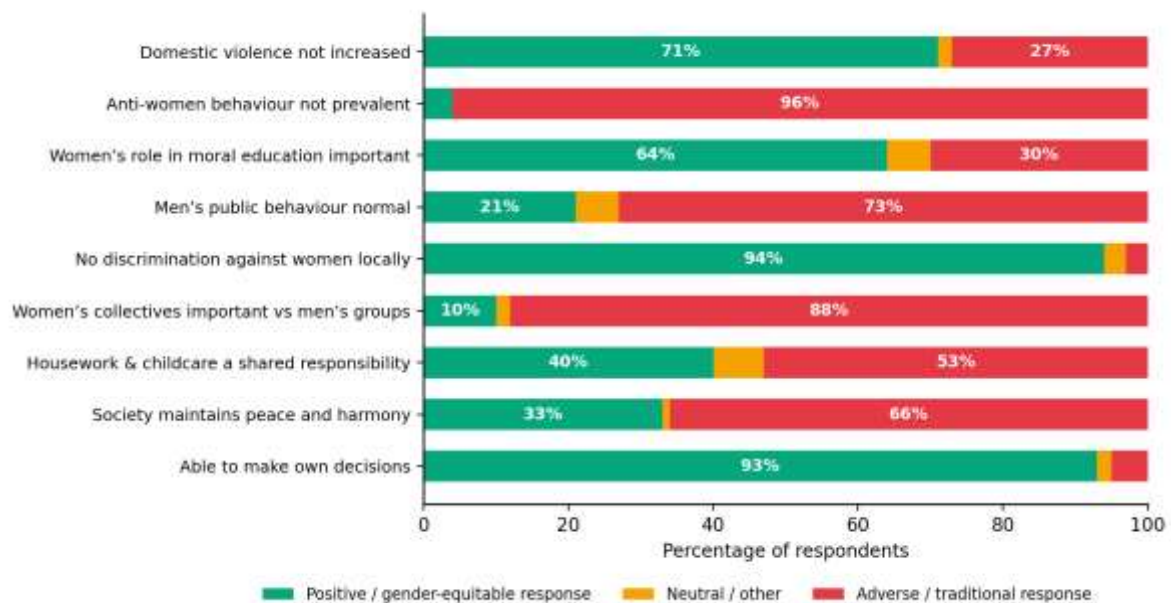


Figure 4: Perceptions of Gender Roles and Social Behaviour

Findings

Table 6 and Figure 4 show a striking difference between the way respondents described their own circumstances and the way they described society. Responses about personal and local matters were mostly positive: 93% said they were able to make their own decisions, 94% saw no discrimination against women in their area and 71% believed domestic violence had not risen. Responses about society were far more negative: 96% considered anti-women behaviour widespread, 73% said men's behaviour in public was not normal, and 66% felt that peace and harmony were not maintained in society. Gender discrimination was likewise the problem most frequently named as facing women in society (77%).

Traditional ideas about gender roles were widespread. Over half of the representatives (53%) stated that housework and childcare were not men's responsibility, while 40% regarded these tasks as shared. Nearly two-thirds (64%) attached importance to women's role in moral education, and 88% did not consider women's collectives important in comparison with men's groups. Respondents gave a positive response to an average of 4.3 of the nine statements. The findings indicate that discrimination is acknowledged in general terms but not recognised in respondents' own localities, and that domestic work is still largely viewed as the responsibility of women.

4. HYPOTHESIS TESTING

4.1 Testing of Hypothesis H01

H01: There is no significant difference in the perceived effectiveness of women-friendly projects among women elected representatives with different socio-demographic and political characteristics.

Variables Used: The independent grouping variables were age group, education, experience in public life, position and electoral term. The main dependent variable was the Perceived Project Effectiveness Score, and the numbers of collective-movement impacts and WCP initiatives reported were used as supplementary dependent variables.

Statistical Test Applied: For the PPES, one-way ANOVA with Levene's test, verified with the Kruskal–Walli's test; for the two count variables, Kruskal–Wallis tests.

Table 7: Perceived Project Effectiveness Score by Respondent Characteristics

Characteristic	N	Mean	SD
Age group			
≤39 years	29	2.816	0.743
40–49 years	41	2.894	0.747
≥50 years	30	3.011	0.675
Education			
Up to SSLC (≤10 yrs)	38	3.035	0.766
Higher secondary (12 yrs)	34	2.843	0.780
Diploma / graduate+ (≥13 yrs)	28	2.810	0.570
Experience in public life			
≤5 years	39	2.769	0.761
6–10 years	32	2.927	0.681
>10 years	29	3.069	0.698
Position			
Office-bearer	23	3.145	0.809
Ward member	77	2.835	0.683
Electoral term			
First term	65	2.841	0.753
Re-elected	35	3.029	0.654

Table 8: One-Way ANOVA and Kruskal–Wallis Tests for Project Effectiveness Measures

Characteristic	Levene F	Levene p	F	df	p (ANOVA)	p (K–W)	p: movement impacts	p: WCP initiatives
Age group	0.137	0.872	0.543	2, 97	0.583	0.541	0.302	0.922
Education	3.579	0.032	0.987	2, 97	0.377	0.454	0.086	0.712
Experience in public life	0.207	0.813	1.467	2, 97	0.236	0.162	0.015	0.821
Position	2.322	0.131	3.332	1, 98	0.071	0.092	0.404	0.162
Electoral term	0.471	0.494	1.545	1, 98	0.217	0.185	0.133	0.492

K–W = Kruskal–Walli’s test for the PPES. The last two columns give Kruskal–Wallis p-values for the number of collective-movement impacts and WCP initiatives reported.

Levene’s test was non-significant for every characteristic apart from education ($p = 0.032$); for education, the Kruskal–Walli’s test ($p = 0.454$) led to the same conclusion as ANOVA. There were no significant differences in the PPES by age, education, experience, position or electoral term (Tables 7 and 8). Office-bearers rated projects a little higher than ward members did (3.15 vs 2.84), but this difference did not reach significance ($F(1, 98) = 3.33$, $p = 0.071$). Scores also increased gradually with experience (2.77, 2.93 and 3.07) without becoming significant. The only significant difference related to the collective movement: members with more than ten years of experience reported a greater number of impacts (5.79) than those with up to five years (4.82) or 6–10 years (4.47) ($p = 0.015$). The number of WCP initiatives reported was similar across all characteristics.

Decision: Every p-value for the Perceived Project Effectiveness Score was above 0.05, so H_0 is not rejected. The difference in the number of collective-movement impacts by experience was significant at the 5% level.

Finding: Representatives evaluated women-friendly projects in a broadly similar way regardless of age, education, position or term. The critical view of the empowerment scheme and wellness centres is thus common to the whole group and not limited to new or less-educated members. Greater experience, however, widened awareness of the collective movement’s achievements.

Hypothesis Conclusion: For perceived project effectiveness, the null hypothesis is not rejected. For collective-movement impacts, which varied significantly with experience in public life, it is partially rejected.

4.2 Testing of Hypothesis H02

H02: There is no significant association between the socio-demographic and political characteristics of women elected representatives and their perceptions of gender roles and social behaviour.

Variables Used: The independent variables were age group, education, experience, position and electoral term; the dependent variables were positive versus other responses to each of the nine statements on gender roles and social behaviour.

Statistical Test Applied: Pearson’s chi-square test, replaced by Fisher’s exact test or a Monte Carlo chi-square test where tables were sparse, with Cramér’s V as the measure of effect size.

Table 9: Chi-Square Tests of Association: p-Value (Cramér's V)

Statement (positive response)	Age	Education	Experience	Position	Term
Domestic violence not increased	0.111 (0.21)	0.148 (0.20)	0.403 (0.13)	0.726 (0.04)	0.595 (0.05)
Anti-women behaviour not prevalent	0.174 (0.21)	1.000 (0.05)	0.684 (0.10)	1.000 (0.01)	0.613 (0.06)
Moral education role important	0.321 (0.15)	0.148 (0.20)	0.738 (0.08)	0.259 (0.11)	0.541 (0.06)
Men's public behaviour normal	0.832 (0.06)	0.536 (0.11)	0.584 (0.10)	0.021* (0.24)	0.396 (0.08)
No local discrimination	0.572 (0.12)	0.575 (0.11)	0.776 (0.08)	0.133 (0.16)	0.088 (0.19)
Women's collectives important	0.910 (0.07)	0.700 (0.09)	0.056 (0.24)	0.446 (0.10)	0.737 (0.03)
Domestic work shared	0.129 (0.20)	0.441 (0.13)	0.751 (0.08)	0.923 (0.01)	0.392 (0.09)
Society peaceful	< .001* (0.51)	0.246 (0.17)	< .001* (0.59)	0.766 (0.03)	< .001* (0.43)
Able to decide	0.086 (0.21)	0.692 (0.09)	0.206 (0.18)	0.347 (0.15)	0.416 (0.12)

* Significant at the 5% level.

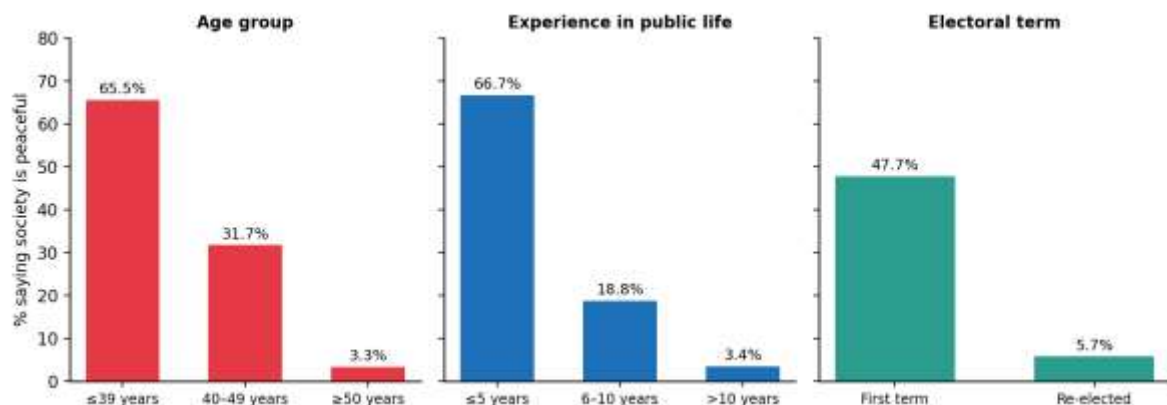


Figure 5: Perception that Society Maintains Peace and Harmony by Age, Experience and Electoral Term

Respondent characteristics were significantly associated with two of the nine statements (Table 9). The strongest association concerned the view that society maintains peace and harmony. Agreement with this view declined sharply with age (65.5%, 31.7% and 3.3%; $V = 0.51$), with experience in public life (66.7%, 18.8% and 3.4%; $V = 0.59$) and with re-election (47.7% of first-term members compared with 5.7% of re-elected members; $V = 0.43$), all at $p < .001$ (Figure 5). Office-bearers were more inclined than ward members to describe men's public behaviour as normal (39.1% vs 15.6%; $p = .021$, $V = 0.24$). No significant differences by any characteristic were found for perceptions of domestic violence, anti-women

behaviour, discrimination, household responsibilities, moral education, women's collectives or decision-making autonomy.

Decision: At the 5% level, significant associations were observed for perceived social harmony (with age, experience and electoral term) and for men's behaviour in public (with position). The other 41 of the 45 tests were not significant.

Finding: Representatives largely held similar views on gender roles. Social harmony was the clear exception: women who were older, more experienced or re-elected were much less likely to see society as peaceful, perhaps because years of settling disputes and handling grievances bring them into contact with more conflict.

Hypothesis Conclusion: The null hypothesis is partially rejected. Socio-political characteristics were related to perceptions of social harmony and of men's behaviour in public, but not to perceptions of household roles, violence, discrimination or decision-making.

4.3 Testing of Hypothesis H03

H03: There is no significant relationship between the perceived effectiveness of women-friendly projects and perceptions of gender roles and social behaviour.

Variables Used: Project measures were the Perceived Project Effectiveness Score and the numbers of collective-movement impacts and WCP initiatives reported; perception measures were the individual gender-role statements and the Gender-Equitable Perception Score.

Statistical Test Applied: Spearman's rank correlation coefficient (ρ).

Table 10: Spearman Correlation between Project Effectiveness and Gender-Role Perceptions

Perception measure (correlated with PPES unless stated)	ρ	p
Domestic violence not increased	-0.015	0.883
Anti-women behaviour not prevalent	0.130	0.200
Moral education role important	0.119	0.239
Men's public behaviour normal	0.112	0.265
No local discrimination	-0.113	0.264
Women's collectives important	0.024	0.811
Domestic work shared	0.280	0.005*
Society peaceful	-0.148	0.141
Able to decide	0.099	0.328
Gender-Equitable Perception Score	0.174	0.085
Collective-movement impacts $\times$ GEPS	0.229	0.023*
WCP initiatives $\times$ GEPS	0.062	0.544

* Significant at the 5% level. n = 99–100.

Perceived project effectiveness had a weak, positive and non-significant correlation with the overall Gender-Equitable Perception Score ($\rho = 0.17$, $p = 0.085$) (Table 10). At the level of individual statements, representatives who judged projects to be more effective were significantly more likely to see household work and childcare as a shared responsibility ($\rho = 0.28$, $p = 0.005$), with a mean PPES of 3.16 against 2.74

for those who did not. Representatives who identified more collective-movement impacts also expressed more gender-equitable perceptions overall ($p = 0.23$, $p = 0.023$). Exposure to WCP literacy initiatives showed no relationship with gender-role perceptions.

Decision: At the 5% level the overall correlation was not significant, although significant positive correlations were observed for shared domestic responsibility and for collective-movement impacts.

Finding: More favourable views of women-friendly projects and of the collective movement were accompanied by more egalitarian attitudes towards domestic work and gender relations, though these associations were weak. The number of literacy initiatives implemented bore no relation to such attitudes.

Hypothesis Conclusion: The null hypothesis is partially rejected. Assessments of projects were related to certain gender-role perceptions, especially the sharing of household responsibilities, but not to the overall perception score.

5. DISCUSSION

The profile of the respondents indicates that reservation remains the primary means through which women enter local government, with 94% being elected from reserved seats and 65% in their first term. A similar dependence on reservation and limited tenure has been noted in other Indian states (Jayal, 2006; Buch, 2010). Their relatively high level of education aligns with Kerala's strong performance in female literacy (IIPS, 2021).

The mixed feedback on women-friendly initiatives is consistent with earlier findings regarding Kerala. Respondents appreciated public awareness and the collective movement, reflecting research that Kudumbasree has created public spaces and leadership opportunities for women (Devika & Thampi, 2007; Williams et al., 2011). However, most representatives reported no advantages from the Women Empowerment Scheme or wellness centres and girls' training programs. This supports the argument that local women's initiatives have focused on practical needs rather than strategic interests (Moser, 1989) and that the quality of decentralized planning has been inconsistent (Chathukulam & John, 2002; Heller et al., 2007). The lack of legal and digital literacy initiatives suggests that critical areas such as rights awareness and access to technology receive minimal focus. Since evaluations did not vary by position, term, or education, these issues appear to be common across the entire group rather than being specific to certain subsets.

The discrepancy between positive local narratives and negative societal accounts reflects what Devika and Thampi (2012) called the gender paradox of decentralization, where women become more visible in public life while traditional norms of domesticity and respectability persist. The fact that 53% of women leaders did not view domestic responsibilities as belonging to men illustrates how gender roles are maintained even by women in positions of public office (West & Zimmerman, 1987) and highlights the dual burden these women endure (Hochschild & Machung, 1989). The widespread recognition of anti-women behaviour aligns with existing evidence of significant violence against women in India (Kalokhe et al., 2017). The perception that domestic violence has not increased may partially stem from under-reporting, given that greater women's representation has been linked to increased reporting of crimes against women (Iyer et al., 2012).

Experience has shown to be a significant factor influencing perceptions. Representatives who had more experience or were re-elected were considerably less likely to perceive society as peaceful and acknowledged more successes of the collective movement. Extended involvement in conflict resolution and project implementation appears to cultivate a more realistic and well-informed perspective, which

aligns with findings that suggest women leaders become more effective as their experience increases (Afridi et al., 2017). The positive correlation between project evaluations and shared domestic duties implies that representatives with more egalitarian views are more receptive to the objectives of women-friendly initiatives, though a cross-sectional design does not clarify the direction of this relationship.

6. CONCLUSION

Women elected representatives in Thiruvananthapuram District do not consider women-friendly projects to be equally effective. They appreciate public-awareness activities and the achievements of the women's collective movement, but most believe the Women Empowerment Scheme and wellness centres and girls' training programmes have contributed little to improving women's status, and this view holds regardless of age, education, position or term. They also widely acknowledge anti-women behaviour and a traditional division of domestic work, even while reporting personal autonomy and little discrimination in their own areas. Longer experience in public life heightens awareness both of social conflict and of the gains made through collective action. A positive picture of women's participation in local government should not, therefore, be read as proof that women-friendly projects have transformed gender relations; the welfare-type components need to be reconsidered, and projects must address gender norms more directly.

7. SUGGESTIONS

1. Because 72% of representatives felt that wellness centres and girls' training programmes did not benefit women, these services should be examined through social audits of their use and redesigned together with women and adolescent girls.
2. The Women Empowerment Scheme should shift from providing welfare towards measurable targets such as employment, mobility, public safety and access to rights.
3. More WCP funding should be directed to legal literacy and digital literacy programmes, which fewer than one in ten panchayats had implemented.
4. Given the persistence of traditional gender roles and anti-women behaviour, awareness campaigns and collective-movement activities should cover the sharing of domestic responsibilities and respectful behaviour by men in public.
5. Experienced and re-elected women representatives should act as mentors to first-term members, who make up two-thirds of the group and are less aware of social conflict and collective achievements.
6. LSGIs should track outcome indicators for women in addition to expenditure, so that the effectiveness of each project component can be judged directly.

8. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The results represent women representatives' perceptions at a single point in time and are not a direct measure of change in the status of women. Because respondents from 28 Grama Panchayats were chosen according to availability, the findings may not extend to municipalities, the corporation or other districts. All information was self-reported and may have been affected by social desirability. The three-item project effectiveness score showed low internal consistency, and certain response options in the translated questionnaire, such as those on household responsibilities, need to be checked against the Malayalam original. As the design was cross-sectional, none of the associations can be interpreted as causal.

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