

A Study on Urban Scheduled Caste Women Empowerment Through Livelihood Diversification - A Study in Kerala

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Abstract

This study explores the role of livelihood diversification in empowering urban Scheduled Caste women in Kerala. Livelihood diversification, encompassing a balance between formal employment and informal activities like agrarian work, enhances economic resilience by reducing dependence on a single income source. Programs such as the AUEGP (Ayyankali Urban Employment Guarantee Program) play a crucial role in supporting informal workers, fostering economic stability, and minimizing vulnerabilities. However, the study reveals that wages from both primary and subsidiary livelihoods minimally impact household spending patterns, indicating that income generation alone does not guarantee empowerment. Instead, cultural norms, household dynamics, and restricted autonomy significantly influence financial decision-making and empowerment outcomes. While the majority of respondents perceive livelihood diversification as a vital strategy for economic empowerment, they face substantial challenges. Barriers such as inadequate education, low income, and limited access to modern technology, entrenched social norms, health issues, and low self-esteem hinder progress. Reproductive responsibilities, particularly pregnancy and childbirth, further complicate economic participation.

Key words : Urban Scheduled Caste women, Livelihood diversification, Empowerment, constraints.

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Women's empowerment is fundamental to societal growth and development, yet across the globe, women continue to face significant economic and social inequalities. Despite their critical contributions to society, women often encounter discrimination, limited opportunities, and unequal treatment, particularly in the workplace. Economic stability - defined as the ability to sustain oneself and one's family through respectable employment or adequate savings - remains a distant goal for many women. Recognizing and enhancing the status of women is not only essential for social progress but also a moral imperative, affirming their equal rights and inherent value as human beings.

In this context, livelihood diversification has emerged as a transformative tool for empowering women. By engaging in multiple income-generating activities, women can break free from the shackles of poverty and dependency. Livelihood diversification reduces economic vulnerability, boosts household income, and enhances overall well-being. Moreover, it instils confidence, fosters independence, and equips women with decision-making power, enabling them to challenge traditional gender roles and stereotypes.

This study investigates the potential of livelihood diversification to empower women economically. By exploring the experiences of women engaged in diversified livelihoods, it sheds light on how this approach not only strengthens individual resilience but also drives broader societal change. Ultimately, livelihood diversification serves as a catalyst for empowering women, transforming their lives, and fostering progress within their families and communities.

Objectives :

1. To analyse the impact of livelihood diversification on urban Scheduled Caste women empowerment in the study area.
2. To find out the constraints women faced by women in diversifying their livelihoods.

Overview of reviewed literature :

Data & Methodology :

The study on urban schedule cast empowerment has shown in previous studies as Duflo and Esther² stated economic development and women's empowerment are strongly linked: on the one hand, growth on its own can significantly reduce gender disparity; on the other hand, empowering women may advance development. This essay examines the research on both sides of the empowerment-development debate and makes the case that ongoing policy commitment to equality for its own sake may be necessary to achieve gender equality because the linkages between the two issues are likely too weak to be sustained. Nayak and Mahanta⁴ assessed the status of women's empowerment in India by analysing various indicators based on secondary data sources. The findings indicate that Indian women are relatively less empowered and hold a lower status compared to men, despite numerous government initiatives. Gender disparities persist in access to education and employment opportunities. Women's decision-making power within households and their freedom of movement vary significantly based on age, education level, and employment status. The study highlights the continued prevalence of unequal gender norms, with many women justifying domestic violence under certain circumstances. Moreover, fewer women have control over their earnings,

although this improves with higher age, education, and urban residence. Women's exposure to media remains limited compared to men, and rural women face higher risks of domestic violence than their urban counterparts. A significant gender gap also exists in political participation. The study concludes that while education and employment are critical enablers of empowerment, achieving true gender equality largely depends on societal attitudes and perceptions towards women. Sohail and Mariam,⁶ explained despite being an integral part of our society, women still face obstacles in obtaining their rights. With regard to education, health, safety, employment, skills, decision-making authority, higher living standards, and respect, women ought to be granted more power. Results show that men are unwilling to empower women because they desire to maintain their dominance. In order to bring prosperity to society, men and women should cooperate. Women need to speak up for their rights and have confidence in themselves. Women's empowerment is crucial to the growth of the economy. Ramaiah *et al.*⁵ analysed the process of empowering impoverished individuals involves increasing their autonomy and capacity to engage in negotiations, exert influence, maintain control, and hold institutions responsible for their lives. One of the key ways to provide women the knowledge, abilities, and self-assurance they need to completely engage in the development process is through education. Better socioeconomic growth is enhanced by it. India's policy of women's empowerment is heavily influenced by a number of factors, such as age, gender, caste, class, family history, and culture. Discrimination in society, economic hardships, societal norms, religious traditions, and violence against women are the obstacles

to Dalit women's emancipation. They are more likely to experience violence, lack decision-making authority, and are unable to access health and educational resources. Given the current circumstances, Dalit women urgently need to be empowered¹ examined agricultural interventions are created based on certain empowerment assumptions, which may not effectively tackle the livelihood constraints faced by the rural women they aim to assist. This deficiency may result from the silence of women who have expressed their views on empowerment and how it relates to current gender norms. It acknowledged that it was situated within agricultural production relations that gave women restricted access to resources and understood the foundations of women's disempowerment. All four major dimensions of power - within, over, to, and with - are acknowledged. The potential of intervention to truly empower women was hampered by the limitations of women's empowerment to the providing function on the condition that it did not confer male dominance over women. However, indications of women's power shifting more internally into collective action and men accepting women's growing areas of influence suggest that there may be for real change in the future.

This study was conducted in the Kollam Municipal Corporation, Kollam district, with a focus on Scheduled Caste women. The corporation has a total of 15,786 Scheduled Caste female population, divided into 55 divisions. For this study, 200 Scheduled Caste women respondents were randomly selected from the Karikodu and Kilikolloor divisions, with 100 respondents from each division. An interview schedule was used to collect data on urban empowerment through livelihood

Table-1. Crosstabulation between livelihoods (Main) and livelihoods (Subsidiary).

Sl. No.	Livelihoods (Main)	Livelihoods (Subsidiary)	No. of livelihoods (Subsidiary)	Total
1.	Govt. bus conductor (Kerala State Road Transport Corporation)	Poultry egg farming	18 (30.0)	18 (9.0)
2.	Cashew factory worker	AUEGP (Ayyankali Urban Employment Guarantee Program)	21 (77.8)	21 (10.5)
3.	Clerk (Court)	Agriculture	1 (4.8)	2 (1.0)
		Cattle rearing	1 (1.1)	
4.	Municipal Corporation Staff	Agriculture	5 (2.3)	14 (7.0)
		Cattle rearing	4 (4.3)	
		Poultry farming	5 (8.3)	
5.	Govt. School Teacher	Agriculture	8 (38.1)	53 (26.5)
		Cattle rearing	27 (29.3)	
		Poultry farming	18 (30.0)	
6.	Govt. Hospital Nurse	Agriculture	7 (33.3)	23 (11.5)
		Cattle rearing	9 (9.8)	
		Poultry farming	7 (11.7)	
7.	House keepers	AUEGP (Ayyankali Urban Employment Guarantee Program)	6 (22.2)	6 (3.0)
8.	LD Clerk	Cattle rearing	48 (52.2)	48 (24.0)
9.	Office attender (Secretariat)	Cattle rearing	3 (3.3)	15 (7.5)
		Poultry farming	12 (20.0)	
	Total			200 (100.00)

Source: Computed from primary data.

diversification among Scheduled Caste women workers. The researcher confined the data collection to the specified objectives, exploring the different livelihoods pursued by women in the Karikodu and Kilikolloor divisions. Simple random sampling was employed to select the sample respondents, who were then interviewed

to gather the required information.

The table-1 explains the distribution of main livelihoods and their associated subsidiary livelihoods among various occupational groups, accounting for a total of 200 subsidiary livelihoods. Government Bus Conductors (Kerala State Road Transport Corporation)

engaged solely in poultry egg farming as their subsidiary livelihood, with 18 livelihoods (30.0percent of their total). Cashew Factory Workers predominantly participated in the Ayyankali Urban Employment Guarantee Program (AUEGP), making up 21 livelihoods (77.8percent). Court Clerks divided their subsidiary activities between agriculture (4.8percent) and cattle rearing (1.1percent), contributing a total of 2 livelihoods. Municipal Corporation Staff diversified their subsidiary activities into agriculture (2.3percent), cattle rearing (4.3percent), and poultry farming (8.3percent), with a total of 14 livelihoods. Government School Teachers exhibited significant involvement in subsidiary activities, particularly in agriculture (29.3percent), cattle rearing (38.1percent), and poultry farming (30.0percent), summing up to 53 livelihoods. Government Hospital Nurses also diversified, contributing to agriculture (33.3percent), cattle rearing (9.8percent), and poultry farming (11.7percent), total 23 livelihoods. Housekeepers exclusively relied on the AUEGP, with 6 livelihoods (22.2percent). Lower Division Clerks (LD Clerks) primarily pursued cattle rearing, accounting for 48 livelihoods (52.2percent). Office Attenders (Secretariat) showed engagement in cattle rearing (3.3percent) and poultry farming (20.0percent), total 15

livelihoods. The largest group of subsidiary livelihoods (24.0percent) was involved in cattle rearing, particularly among LD Clerks, while agriculture and poultry farming were also significant across multiple main livelihoods. These patterns reflect a strong reliance on agrarian and animal-rearing activities as supplementary income sources.

The data highlighted the significant role of livelihood diversification, particularly among women, who engage in both formal and informal work to supplement household income. Women in formal roles, such as government school teachers, nurses, and clerks, often rely on informal subsidiary livelihoods like agriculture, cattle rearing, and poultry farming, showcasing their ability to balance structured employment with flexible agrarian activities. Informal workers, such as housekeepers and cashew factory workers, depend heavily on government schemes like the Ayyankali Urban Employment Guarantee Program (AUEGP), underscoring the importance of such programs in providing economic stability. This pattern reflects the intertwined nature of formal and informal economies in supporting women's livelihoods, promoting resilience, and reducing economic vulnerability in rural and semi-urban areas.

Table-2. Household spending and monthly earnings of primary and subsidiary livelihoods
Regression Coefficient

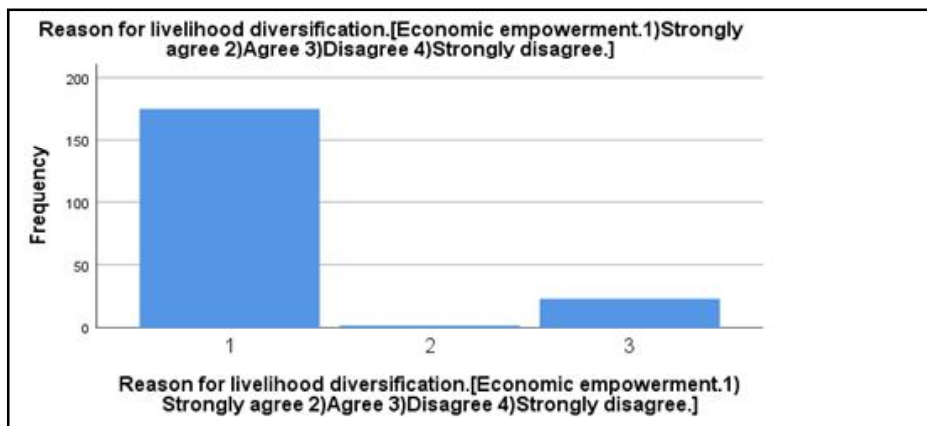
Source	Sum of Squares	Df.	Mean Square	F- value	Significance value
Regression	.526	2	.263	.902	.407 ^b
Residual	57.394	197	.291		
Total	57.920	199			

a. Dependent Variable: Routine household spending. 1) Full 2) Partial 3) Nil

b. Predictors: (Constant), Wage/salary received per month in primary livelihoods (in Rs.) and Wage/salary received per month in subsidiary livelihoods (in Rs.)

Table-2 shows the regression analysis examines the relationship between livelihood diversification, measured through wages/salaries from primary and subsidiary livelihoods, and routine household spending categorized as Full, Partial, or Nil. The results show that the predictors -wages from primary and subsidiary livelihoods - do not significantly explain variations in household spending, as indicated by a high p-value (0.407) and a low F-value (0.902). The model accounts for less than 1percent of the variance in spending behaviour, suggesting that wages from these income sources have a limited direct impact on household spending patterns.

In the context of women's empowerment, these findings highlight that mere income generation through diversified livelihoods may not necessarily translate into control over household spending or financial decision-making. This suggests the presence of other influential factors, such as cultural norms, household dynamics, or women's decision-making autonomy, which may mediate the relationship. To enhance women's empowerment, efforts should focus not only on promoting diversified income sources but also on strengthening women's financial independence and control over household resources.



Source: Computed from primary data.

Figure 1. Reason for livelihood diversification and economic empowerment.

The bar chart 1 illustrates the distribution of responses regarding the reasons for livelihood diversification and its connection to women's empowerment, specifically focusing on economic empowerment. The data indicates that the majority of respondents strongly agree that economic empowerment is a primary reason for livelihood diversification, as this category (1) has the highest frequency, significantly surpassing the other response

categories. A small number of respondents disagree (category 3), suggesting some dissenting views on this connection, while "Agree" (category 2) and "Strongly disagree" (category 4) show minimal representation. This suggests that livelihood diversification is widely perceived as a vital strategy for enhancing women's economic empowerment, though a minority expresses differing opinions.

Table-3. Constraints Faced by Urban SC Women Descriptive Statistics

Constraints of livelihood diversification (1. Large extent 2. Some extent 3. No extent) N = 200	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Poor educational background	Large extent	Some extent	1.52	.501
Social norms	Large extent	No extent	2.67	.490
Inadequate training and skill acquisition program	Large extent	No extent	2.99	.141
Insecurity/poor working condition	No extent	No extent	3.00	.000
Low income	Large extent	Some extent	1.52	.501
Working longer hours	Some extent	No extent	2.76	.425
Health challenges	Large extent	No extent	2.23	.670
Low self-esteem/no confidence	Some extent	No extent	2.76	.425
Sexual harassment	No extent	No extent	3.00	.000
In accessibility of modern technology	Large extent	Some extent	1.52	.501
Delay in salaries/wages	Some extent	No extent	2.76	.425
Pregnancy and child birth	Large extent	Large extent	1.00	.000

Source: Computed from primary data.

The table-3 highlighted constraints to livelihood diversification, with varying degrees of impact on women's empowerment. Key challenges like poor educational background, low income, and lack of access to modern technology have a significant impact ("large extent," mean = 1.52), reflecting systemic barriers to skill enhancement and economic participation. In contrast, issues like insecurity, poor working conditions, and sexual harassment show no variability (mean = 3.00), suggesting minimal reported impact or uniform perceptions in this sample. Social norms, health challenges, and low self-esteem moderately constrain diversification, limiting women's confidence and access to diverse income sources. Pregnancy and childbirth stand out as a unique constraint affecting all respondents

to a "large extent" (mean = 1.00), underlining the intersection of reproductive responsibilities with economic challenges. Addressing these barriers through targeted education, skill programs, and supportive policies is essential for fostering livelihood diversification and empowering women economically and socially.

In conclusion the impact of livelihood diversification on the empowerment of urban Scheduled Caste women and identify the challenges they face in diversifying their livelihoods. Livelihood diversification plays a vital role in enhancing women's economic resilience by enabling them to balance formal employment with informal activities like agrarian work. Programs such as the AUEGP (Ayyankali Urban Employment Guarantee

Program) support informal workers, fostering stability and reducing economic vulnerability. However, findings reveal that wages from primary and subsidiary livelihoods have a minimal direct impact on household spending patterns, explaining less than 1 percent of the variance. This suggests that income generation alone does not guarantee financial decision-making power for women, as cultural norms, household dynamics, and limited autonomy significantly influence empowerment outcomes.

Most respondents strongly agree that livelihood diversification is a key strategy for economic empowerment, though a minority holds differing views. Despite its potential, significant barriers exist, including poor education, low income, limited access to modern technology, social norms, health issues, and low self-esteem. Pregnancy and childbirth pose universal challenges, highlighting the intersection of reproductive responsibilities with economic constraints. To fully empower urban Scheduled Caste women, targeted efforts are needed to address these challenges. Initiatives should focus on improving education, enhancing skills, providing access to modern technologies, and promoting supportive policies. Additionally, fostering financial independence and decision-making autonomy alongside income diversification is essential for achieving sustainable social and economic empowerment.

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Conflict of Interest

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