

DEVELOPMENT EXPENDITURE ON WOMEN EMPOWERMENT UNDER ECENTRALISATION IN KODASSERY GRAMA PANCHAYAT IN THRISSUR DISTRICT IN KERALA

Jayasree Paul*

Abstract

With the decentralization process picking up momentum in Kerala ever since the enactment of Kerala Panchayath Raj Act 1999, women empowerment has been one of the most important priorities of the process. In spite of an enviable track record human development in Kerala, gender disparities do persist in the state to a large extent even today, underscoring the significance of development interventions focusing on women. In the above context, this paper makes an empirical study of the development expenditure on women empowerment under decentralization with reference to Kodassery Grama Panchayat in Thrissur District in Kerala.

Key Terms: Decentralization, Women Empowerment, Women Component Plan (WCP).

**Assistant Professor, Dept. of Economics, Panampilly Memorial Government College,, Chalakudy, Thrissur (KERALA).*

Introduction

“You can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the status of women”.

Jawaharlal Nehru

The government of India had ushered the new millennium by declaring the year 2001 as ‘Women Empowerment Year’. The government intended here to focus on the theme ‘women are equal partners like men’. The most common explanation of women empowerment is the ability to exercise full control over one’s actions. The last decades have witnessed some basic changes in the status and role of women in our society. There has been a shift in policy approaches from the concept of welfare in the 70’s to development in the 80’s and now to empowerment in the 90’s. Empowerment of women has been recognized as a central issue in determining the status of women. Empowerment is a process, not an event, which challenges traditional power, equation and relations. Decentralized planning is supposed to give an appropriate way to deal with their concerns and problems through local grass root participation.

Kerala is facing a paradoxical situation of high human development with lots of gender inequalities. The decentralized planning during the mid-nineties, has given greater visibility to the gender issues first time in the history of Kerala. The decentralized planning set up Grama Sabha with a mission of ensuring women’s participation in local governance as well as in decision making and to facilitate women empowerment in all dimensions. Although these novel strategies open up new avenues for uplifting women, their involvement as key agents to development is still neglected. Why a system rooted in Grama Sabha fails to bring up women in the lime light and also unable to address their adverse conditions. In this context, it is essential to analyze the feasibility of decentralized planning in generating a favorable environment for focusing women. This Panchayath level study is an enquiry to assess her role as decision maker in local level planning, identify those impediments in participation and decision making and finally in women empowerment.

Analytical significance

Women constitute half of population and play a vital role in the development of family, community and nation. But women constitute 70 per cent of the world's poor and 2/3rd of world's illiterates. They occupy only 14 per cent of managerial and administrative jobs, 10 per cent of parliamentary seats and 6 per cent of cabinet positions. In many legal systems, they are still unequal. They often work longer than men, but much of their work remains unvalued, unrecognized and unappreciated. The threat of violence stalks their lives from cradle to grave.

The educational indicators, health indicators and demographic indicators with respect to women in Kerala are significantly better than the national averages. The most well known ratio, of course is the sex ratio, which is 1058 as compared to 933 in India according to 2001 census. Although the state of Kerala had exhibited high level of women empowerment indicators, women were systematically excluded from various aspects of development. Her poor representation in state and national level politics is also widely noted. Her female work participation was as low as 16 per cent in 2001. Eapon and Kodoth (2002) observed that there is a growing uneasiness with Kerala's social development outcomes linked to non-conventional indicators, such as the rising visibility of gender based violence, mental ill health among women and rapid growth and spread of dowry and related crimes. In this context, many development oriented interventions have been made to remove gender discrimination by raising women's access to resources and also to empower her for decision making.

The 73rd and 74th amendments have given political power to them through which one-third of the posts has been kept reserved for women

in local bodies. The Kerala Panchayath Raj Act 1999 included Grama Sabha as an integral component of the Panchayath system. Grama Sabha is an institutional mechanism of participatory democracy. It provides an opportunity to all the people irrespective of sex, religion and money to participate in the development process. The people's campaign for 9th plan ensured greater participation of women in the Grama Sabha and preference to projects with gender issues.

The decentralized planning implemented in 1996 attempted to formulate a separate task force to focus women's project under the plan-head Women's Component Plan (WCP). It was decided that the local bodies were required to set apart 10 per cent of the development funds under WCP for addressing women's needs. The People's campaign has brought about special projects for women and they get an opportunity to participate effectively in public life. But for the last 10 years, the participation of women in the actual WCP plan preparation was low and the actual expenditure under WCP was much less than the required 10 per cent.

Although the much celebrated people's campaign in 1996 prepared a ground for women participation, her presence in the platform for decision making still remained rather trivial. Accordingly, a grass root level study is quite essential to ascertain her role in decision making at local level and also identify the problems she faced in decision making. The present study is an effort in the above direction, and it focuses on Kodassery Grama Panchayath in Thrissur District in Kerala for the empirical study at the grass root level as noted above.

Review of literature and research gap

Baltiwala (1997) has observed "Empowerment is a process which exchange existing power relation by addressing itself to three dimensions material, human and intellectual resources. It is

a process which must challenge and change ideology, the set of ideas, attitudes, beliefs and practice in which gender bias or social bias like caste, class, regionalism and communalism are embedded.”

Sarada Muraleedharan (2003) has noted that decentralized planning offers democracy in place of domination, empowerment in place of submission, environment and community in place of profit, and in place of passivity. The reality is that the women’s movement is weak, in its capacity to obstruct unsatisfactory policy outcomes.

Various reports present contrasting pictures about women’s participation in decentralization process. Government efforts to participate more marginalized groups and weaker sections have been a tremendous success in rural areas, whereas it seems that it has suffered a slight set back in the case of urban women, as there has been a retreat of urban women from the arena of development activities. (K. Muraleedharan 2000). The state level estimation of participation of women varies from 15 per cent (Frank and Chasin, 1997) to 27 per cent (Issac, Thomas and Harilal1997). In a district level study at Thrissur, between 1996 and 1999, the percentage share of women’s participation had increased steeply from 23.40 per cent to 44.02 per cent (Muraleedharan 2000).

D. Narayana (2007) found that women’s participation in all aspects of governance of the Grama Panchayath is lower than that of men in many states. Among the states, Kerala fares much better as the differences are not large, except in two aspects, namely attendance in election meetings and persons able to raise Issues in meetings. D. Narayana (2007), in his study state that there in a comparison between Tamil Nadu and Kerala about the participation of SC/poor section in Grama Panchayath. In Kerala, many poverty alleviation programs are designed and implemented at the village level.

Manoj P K (2008) in research paper has studied the vital role of E-Governance in ensuring enhanced transparency and operational efficiency in the delivery of services, including its role in effectively implementing decentralization and local level planning. The E-Governance initiatives of the Government of Kerala and their implications have been elaborately discussed in the paper, along with suggestions for better performance.

According to M. N. Sudhakaran (2009), in Kerala, the proportion of women participation in the first de-centralization period was 37.1 per cent. The proportion was only 26.2 per cent in 1996, which increased to 40.8 per cent in 1997, which declined to 38.5 percent in 1998, and then increased to 40.6 per cent in 2000. The women participation hovers around 40 per cent of total participation in the first decentralization period. But there was an improvement after that.

In Kerala, Women were more active in groups where there was a preponderance of women. In standing committee, males dominate even through women may chair such committee. Women belonging to forward community find it more useful to be engaged in their own productive ventures, or to enjoy leisure at home, rather than attend the Grama Sabha meeting (Luciyamma Kurian 2000).

Manoj P K (2010) has studied the housing microfinance activities of Kudumbasree organized under a specialized scheme viz. ‘Bhavanasree’ – the housing microfinance (HMF) initiative of Kudumbasree. The problems and prospects of ‘Bhavanasree’ scheme, its efficacy in fulfilling the housing needs of Kudumbasree women including its potential for women empowerment are critically studied. Accordingly, strategies for superior performance of the scheme have been suggested by the author based on study findings.

Manoj P. K (2012) has pointed out the high women empowerment potential of micro enterprises under Kudumbasree based on empirical evidence. Based on the findings of the study, the author has made suggestions for further improvement in the performance of the microenterprises under Kudumbasree and hence better level of the empowerment of women entrepreneurs of such micro enterprises.

It was made mandatory to set apart 10 per cent of the grant in aid for the “Women Component Plan (WCP)”. There had been no guidelines as to what constituted such a plan, although the resource persons and Panchayath presidents had been given, as part of their induction training, orientation on examining gender issues in the local context. A review of the first year of the mandatory WCP projects showed that although the amounts set apart for women based projects went up considerably from 3% to 9.6%, the projects tended not to be women centric and were general projects where the beneficiaries were women (Sarada Muraleedharan (2003). The mandatory 10 per cent appears to have been more or less achieved for the five year period as a whole, some items of general expenditure were really ascribed to the WCP like *anganwadi* feeling, toilets, drinking water and roads, thereby cutting down or resources indented primarily for women (Human Development Report Kerala 2005). As per a study done at Ernakulum district, funds under WCP has been noted to be used for meeting general needs, and not for strategic needs of women. (Human Development Report: Ernakulum District 2009).

In view of the foregoing, it is noted that though there have been a number of studies on decentralized planning and its implications on women empowerment, including specialized studies that focus on allied aspects like E-Governance, housing microfinance etc. and their women empowerment potential; empirical and grass root level studies that focus on women’s participation in decision making and problems

faced by them in this process are virtually nil. In fact, this is the research gap which this paper seeks to bridge.

Objectives of the paper

- (i) To assess the socio-economic and political status of women in Kodassary Grama Panchayath of Thrissur District in Kerala;
- (ii) To verify as to whether the women in the study area could fulfill the objectives of participatory democracy as envisaged by the Grama Sabha and decentralization;
- (iii) To suggest suitable strategies for more meaningful participation of women in the local level planning and hence to ensure their empowerment.

Decentralization and women empowerment

Women empowerment is critical to socio-economic development of the community and it is a tool of bringing women into the mainstream of national development as participants and not mere beneficiaries. Decentralized planning opens up the opportunity for women’s participation in local governance as well as in decision making and has the potential to facilitate women empowerment in all dimensions.

Women Empowerment

Women empowerment plays a vital role in the progress of a family, community, nation and the world as a whole. The literal meaning of empowerment means ‘to invest with power’. The term has come to denote women’s increased control over their own lives, bodies and environment. Women empowerment emphasizes women’s decision making roles, their economic self-reliance, and their legal rights to equal treatment, inheritance and protection against all forms of discrimination.

Women empowerment means giving the capacity and means to direct women's life towards desired goals. Empowerment of women is a new ideology for carrying democratic values into the family and the society. Empowerment is an active process of enabling women to realize their identity, potentiality and power in all spheres of their lives. Empowerment of women also means equal status to women.

The primary objective of empowerment of women is to create more equitable and participatory structures in which women can gain control over their lives. Empowerment should enable them to increase their self-reliance, to assert their right to make choices and to challenge and eliminate their own subordination. The constitutional amendment on local governance through Panchayath Raj Institutions (PRIs) sought to create for the first time a space for women empowerment. Identification of the felt needs of the people was the major objective in the decentralized plan process. Grama Sabha is supposed to ensure maximum participation of people specially women and other weaker section.

Decentralization Process in Kerala

The literal meaning of decentralization is transferring decision making powers and functions from the central government or state government to the local bodies with a view to transform the society and injects a greater degree of efficiency. Democratic decentralization seeks to associate the people's participation in the decision making powers at the local level. There exists a triangular relationship between decentralization, democracy and development.

Kerala embarked on a trajectory of rapid decentralization since October 1995. To operationalize decentralization, Kerala chose the path of participatory local level planning as the entry point. This succeeded to a considerable extent in harnessing public action in favor of

decentralization. To push the system and force the process, a campaign approach was followed for decentralized planning known as the 'People's Planning Campaign' (PPC); and PPC has been the cornerstone of Kerala's decentralization efforts.

The Panchayath Raj as a system of self-governance was introduced in 1995 as per the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee report that recommended a three-tier structure of local self-governments. The 64th Constitutional Amendment Bill was introduced in the 1989 and this provided for 30 per cent reservation for women. Later the Act constitutionally reserved 33 per cent of all seats in Panchayath and Municipalities for women. Finally, in 2009, the Union Cabinet on Thursday, Aug 27 approved 50 percent reservation for women in all Panchayaths across the country. The Panchayath level elections held in Kerala in 2010 implemented the strategy of 50 per cent reservation to women in all PRIs.

Women empowerment is an integral part of any development administration. This is more so in a local level development under the Panchayath Raj and the devolution of new powers to it. Almost all the local bodies prepared special projects for women. But in no district, the target of 10 per cent was met. On an average, 7 per cent of the state grant- in-aid was set apart for special programmers for women. The Kerala Panchayath Raj Act was passed on the 23rd, April 1994. One of the novel features introduced by the Act was constitutional guarantee provided for the entry of women to the local elected bodies. The launching of participatory local governance has set up a forum for assessment of its performance through seminars and workshops in the state. One supportive mechanism for implementation was the Grama Sabha.

Women Component Plan (WCP)

A unique feature of decentralized planning in Kerala initiated after the passing of the 73rd and

74th Constitutional Amendments was the conscious attempt to integrate gender issues in all phases of the local level planning process. It was further strengthened by mandating 10 per cent of the plan grant in aid devolved to the Local Self Governing Institutions (LSGIs) to be set apart for projects directly benefiting women. This came to be known as the Women Component Plan (WCP). It was made more comprehensive by directing beneficiary funds to flow through self help groups of women facilitating larger participation of women in the local level planning process.

In Kerala, the introduction of mandatory Women Component Plan has been a path breaker. Local governments have gradually matured in their planning for gender sensitive schemes. Earmarking 10 per cent of the Plan outlined for women has helped considerably the disadvantaged groups among women like widows, and has improved the provision of services which are of direct benefit to women. The People’s Planning Process has left an indelible mark in the minds of the people. This is reflected in the high awareness level regarding the process among the beneficiary respondents. The WCP guidelines have helped the officials and elected representatives in formulating projects under WCP. The new system of planning has created opportunities for

women to highlight their felt needs and problems in the Grama Sabha something that was not available to them earlier.

Women component plan in kodassery grama panchayat

The campaign implemented in 1996 attempted to formulate a separate task force to focus women’s project under the Plan head, WCP. It was decided that local bodies should set apart 10 per cent of the development funds under WCP for addressing women’s needs. The People’s campaign has launched special projects for women and they get an opportunity to participate effectively in public life. For the last 10 years, the participation of women in the actual WCP plan preparation was low and the actual expenditure under WCP was much less than the required 10 per cent. The fund utilized under WCP was mainly for meeting general needs like housing, drinking water and sanitation and the strategic needs of women were not addressed effectively (Vijayan, Aleyamma 2004). The development fund allocated to WCP from the year 20007-08 to 2011-12 is given in Table I. The actual expenditure under WCP is close to 10 per cent or exceeds 10 per cent in some years. In 2009-2010, the allocation was more than even 11 per cent.

Table I: WCP Allocations in Kodassery Grama Panchayath

Year	WCP (Rs.)	Total Development Fund (Rs.)	WCP (Per cent of Total)
2007-2008	1183650	12623211	9.38
2008-2009	1383190	15498453	8.92
2009-2010	1921919	16088145	11.94
2011-2012	2260500	22306754	10.13

(Source: Compiled from Official Plan Documents, Kodassery Grama Panchayath)

Table II: Pattern of Expenditure under WCP in Kodassery Grama Panchayath

Particulars	Development Fund			
	2007-2008	2008-09	2009-10	2011-2012
House for women's	378000	180000	200000	450000
Seed distribution	25000			

Poultry (cow, Goat)	297750	42750	374719	375000
Hen distribution	185000		208200	240000
Balasabha	27000			
Self-employment Programme	100000	100000	150000	
Bhavanasree subsidies	100900			
Marriage assistance	70000	100000		400000
Sewing machine distribution		50000		50000
Self help group grant/subsidy		700000		
Cowshed maintenance		160440	148000	73000
Training for driving		160440	150000	150000
CDS Revolving fund			1000	
ADS Revolving fund			190000	
Nutritional food for Anganavadi			500000	
Training for textile printing				115000
Toilet construction				142500
Training for Catering				265000
Total	1183650	1383190	1921919	2260500

(Source: Compiled from Official Plan Documents, Kodassary Grama Panchayath)

Now it is the need of the hour to analyze whether the fund allocated to WCP is utilized for women empowerment programme. We analyzed the expenditure come under WCP head in Kodassary Grama Panchayath. From the data one can infer that a considerable proportion of expenditure under WCP is utilized for general needs like house maintenance and cow-shed maintenance.

The development funds under WCP are proposed to address women’s needs through special projects for women exclusively. In Kodassary Panchayath major part of the WCP fund are used for women empowerment. However, a substantial part of the fund are also being spend on Anganavadi feeding / Programmes like Self-employment Program, Skill Development Program, House / Toilet

construction, General Housing or Marriage assistance, which should actually come out of general expenditures.

In 2007-08, 60 per cent of expenditure under WCP is utilized for women empowerment programme like, self-employment programme but, 40 per cent of the amount is spent on general purposes like house and cowshed construction, seed distribution etc. In 2008-09, only 32 per cent of the amount was spent on direct benefit of the women. In 2009-10, a substantial amount around 2, 00,000 was allocated for house construction itself. Only 44 per cent was set apart for women empowerment. In 2011-12, this same trend repeats. We can infer from the table no. 3 that mean expenditure of WCP for woman empowerment is around 46 per cent.

Table III: Allocation of WCP Fund for Women Empowerment
(Amount in Rupees)

Items	2007-2008	2008-2009	2009-2010	2011-2012
Exclusive Women Empowerment program	600900 (60%)*	440440 (32%)	848000 (44%)	1065500 (47%)

General Expenditure	582750 (40%)	942750 (68%)	1073919 (56%)	1195000 (53%)
Total WCP Expenditure	1183650	1383190	1921919	2260500

(Source: Compiled from Official Plan Documents, Kodassary Grama Panchayath)

* Figures in parentheses shows percentage expenditure of total WCP expenditure

Concluding remarks

People's planning provided a great impetus to women in Kerala. People's planning facilitated a space for women who were absent in planning for a long period. Kodassery Grama Panchyath has spent WCP amount for productive activities, but a substantial part of WCP was spent on general purpose like housing, seed distribution which do not yield any direct benefit on women and which do not come under the purview of WCP. As such, it is suggested that urgent policy decision be taken by top level authorities to ensure that allocations under WCP are made strictly for activities having direct linkage with women empowerment particularly those targeted at meeting their strategic needs, rather than for meeting general needs like drinking water and sanitation. Policy directives in the above direction be sent to all offices down the line so as to avoid siphoning of funds earmarked for women for other purposes. In spite of a few initial problems like the one above, the scheme as such appears to have good prospects for women empowerment in the future.

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