

Does Gender Status Translate into Economic Participation of Women? Certain Evidence from Kerala

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Abstract

Many indicators of gender inclusiveness show that Kerala has been much ahead of other states in ensuring the welfare of females. It needs to be reiterated that in both education and health, women in Kerala stand quietly at the receiving ends as the beneficiaries rather than the agents of economic and social change. The women's inclusive way of progress does not necessarily confine itself to the widening of education and health opportunities for women. Still, it largely and more positively depends on the effective participation of women in economic activities. It is disheartening that if we probe into the status of women from these yardsticks of 'active' economic participation, the picture of gender equality appears more discouraging in Kerala, which has been acclaimed as a 'model' for not only other states in the country but also for other countries in the world. A secular decline in the Work Participation Rate for women in the labor market clearly shows that education does not aid women to add themselves to the labor market. Economists and sociologists offer many plausible explanations for this absconding nature of educated and skilled women from the labor market. The real gender inclusion and women empowerment will be fulfilled only when women start actively engaging in productive fields using their knowledge and entitlements.

Keywords: Gender status, Women empowerment, Work force Participation, Active agents, Unemployment, Decision making, Economic participation.

Introduction

It has long been recognized that the objective of creating an inclusive society remains unfulfilled without ensuring gender parity in various aspects of social and economic life (Kelles-Viitanen & Shrestha, 2011). Taking this into account, various endeavors have been devised and executed across countries to ensure the inclusion of women in every sphere of possible economic and social interactions and activities (Balakrishnan, 2019). In the past, India had held women in high esteem, and gender discrimination was a rarity in the country (Kapur, 2019). Many still regard gender disparity at the household level as 'natural' as it stems from certain biological differences between men and women (GoK, 2018). In recent times, increasing significance to inclusive development and growth has again brought back the role and importance of women into the large picture.

It is true that the seeds of gender division are sown in the household itself, with women being reserved for certain specific activities requiring less skill and physical work, and therefore attracting no remuneration in return (Blood, R.O., & Wolfe, D.M, 1960). Often, the works of women go underpaid or unpaid owing to the social and economic misconceptions attached to such jobs (Bianchi, 2012). For instance, the kitchen work of a housewife does not yield any return, whereas the same work carried out by a chef in a restaurant attracts reasonably good returns (Coltrane, 2000).

This kind of discrimination has been found ever since the beginning of history globally, not in India alone. Perhaps, on account of this historical understanding, many gender interventionists have pointed out that gender sensitization efforts must be commenced at the household level rather than at the national level (Nadkarni, 2012).

A great shift of emphasis on how women are viewed in the development process has become visible in recent times. Women were considered as ‘passive’ agents, but now they have themselves become ‘active’ agents of growth and development (Mirkin, 1984). They have been moved from being mere ‘recipients’ of benefits or ‘beneficiaries’ of doll outs from the government to active agents of transformation in society and the economy. This shift could also be observed in the way of analysis being done on the relationship between women and development (WAD) to that of Women in Development (WID) (GoK, 2018). Studies have proved that education and skills that women acquire will have a multiplier positive impact on the socio-economic life of the household members and the economy at large. In social and economic well-being, female-headed households have performed far better than male-headed households. Keeping in mind that women could be the best agent of economic and social transformation, many welfare-oriented and anti-poverty programs have been devised to suit the interest of the women agent in society. For instance, in India, it has been made mandatory that under the MGNREGS programs, a considerable number of beneficiaries should be women. In Kerala, Neighborhood Groups are formed with the women, and financial institutions do not have hesitation to lend to such groups on the security of group liability. This sheer understanding that women have got such a unique place in the development agenda of the State might tempt someone to dwell into the present status of women in the State. Against this background, this paper is prepared with the following objectives in mind.

Objectives

- To examine the gender status in Kerala.
- To probe into whether women in Kerala have

moved from being the passive recipients of benefits to active agents in economic participation.

Methodology

This paper relies on secondary data for the analysis. Secondary data have been obtained mainly from various issues of Economic Review published by the State Planning Board of Kerala. Besides, information from the State Health Services and Statistical department, NSS, Directorate of Collegiate Education, Kerala, Directorate of Public Instruction, Kerala, and various publications of Women and Men in India has also been used.

Concepts and Measurement of Gender Status

Every effort at gender equality is likely to be thwarted by various conceptual and execution issues. Conceptual issues primarily center on a plethora of yardsticks used to measure the disparity in gender development. The main conundrum regarding the conceptualization of gender disparity is that it is usually perceived as an abstract one when its features are converted into certain ratio figures. However, as there is no other sophisticated measuring rode to scale it, it is imperative that we need to rely on these existing measures. Let us look at the ratio figures popularly used to ascertain the extent of gender disparity in society. One primary measure of gender disparity is the one that has been developed by the UNDP and has come to be known as the Gender Development Index (GDI). GDI is built on three dimensions of human development, viz. health, knowledge, and living standards of people (Prabhu, Sarker, & Radha, 1996).

On the other hand, Gender Inequality Index, the GII, calculates gender inequality based on three aspects, viz. reproductive health, empowerment, and economic status. Maternal mortality rate (MMR) and the adolescent birth rate are used to measure reproductive health, while education and representation in parliament are indicators of women empowerment. As a proxy for economic status, labor force participation of women is used to calculate GII. UNDP has also come up with the latest measure of gender disparity, which is called ‘Life Course Gender Gap’ (GoK, 2018). This is based on choices exercised by women and the opportunities

available to them in the different types of market viz. labor market. The indicators in this measure cover health, education, labor market and work, political participation, use of time, and social protection that the women enjoy.

According to the Gender Gap Index (GGI) published by the World Economic Forum (WEF), India has been ranked 108th among 149 countries. It needs to be noted that India's rank in certain sub-indices like economic opportunity and participation index is as low as 142 out of 149 countries (PTI, 2018). But, when it comes to wage equality, India's performance in bridging the gender disparity seems remarkable as India has been able to narrow down gender disparity in wages considerably. Well, known is the fact that India has quite a large number of people working in the field of Artificial Intelligence (AI), and India has one of the largest AI gender gaps in the world as only 22 percent of its AI Workforce is constituted by females (GoK, 2018). Further, the report reveals that India has closed its gender disparity to the extent of 66 percent.

Status of Women in Kerala

Kerala has been a women-friendly state in India. Many of the indicators of gender inclusiveness show that Kerala has been much ahead of other states in ensuring the welfare of females (Chacko, 2003). In the case of sex ratio, the very crude index of women empowerment, and the status of women in society, Kerala has been quite ahead of other states in the country for many years. In the 2011 census, it has been recorded that Kerala has 1084 females for 1000 males. Of the total households in Kerala, 22 percent are female-headed households, while in India, it is just 11 percent. If one looks at the infant mortality rates, it could be observed that the IMR among females in Kerala is as low as 11 in contrast to 36 at the all-India level. Maternal Mortality Rate, another indicator of the healthiness of the female, turns much favorable to the females in Kerala. For instance, MMR in Kerala is 46, while it is 130 in India (Table No.1). Quite unsurprisingly, females in Kerala live longer than their counterparts at the all India level. While a lady from Kerala lives for 78 years, an Indian lady lives for ten years.

Table 1: Health Status of Women in India and Kerala Indicators

Indicators	Kerala	India
Infant Mortality Rate (IMR)	11	36
Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR)	46	130
Life Expectancy	77.9	70.2

Source: Health Management Information System, 2018

In most developing economies, there is a bigger gender gap in the provision of educational opportunities. One of the core Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) is the elimination of gender disparity at different levels of education (Thirlwall, 2011). A clear picture of the status of women in education would be evident from the data on the enrollment of girls in Kerala at different levels of education, viz. school education and B-Tech education (Table No. 2). In schools, 49.01 percent of enrolled students are girls. In comparison, it is 68.49 percent at the Graduation level, which underlines that as the level of education increases, the percentage of girl students getting enrolled also increases in Kerala. This is, of course, a positive sign of the educational achievements of girls in Kerala, and this must have led to higher levels of women empowerment in the State. Because from the social point of view, the returns to investment on females could be quite high as women not only would enhance their entitlements and capabilities through education but they also build a sound foundation for social and economic advancement via the enormous direct and indirect effect of their so-called capabilities and entitlements. Female education is the variable that highly correlates with the chief social indicators (Summers, 1994). But, the disheartening picture lies in the case of technical education. This is obvious because girls constitute only less than 40 percent of students in B-Tech courses and 28.86 percent in Poly techniques showing much disinterest among girls towards job oriented courses.

Table 2: Enrollment of Girls at Different Levels-2017-18

Indicators	Percent of Girls
School Education	49.01
Higher Secondary Education	51.84
Graduation	68.49

Post-Graduation	67.01
B-Tech	38.24
Polytechniques	28.86

Source: Kerala Economic Review, 2018

It is obvious from the above discussion that in the spheres of education and health, women in Kerala has been given better consideration, and this has, of course, resulted in desired outcomes in the form of better education for girls and a high level of health status of women including an increase in their life expectancy. However, it needs to be reiterated here that in the case of both education and health, women stand quietly at the receiving ends as the beneficiaries rather than the agents of economic and social change. In other words, women receive the benefits of education and improvements in health facilities in the State. It is true that such better levels that they achieve in education and health might have created positive linkage effects for their families and society at large. In the next session, we probe into the question of whether the high health and education status of women has translated into their economic participation or not.

Does the better Gender Status of female translate itself into economic participation?

The women inclusive way of progress does not necessarily confine itself to the widening of education and health opportunities for women, more specifically, women being the mere receipts of these benefits. Still, it largely and more positively should depend on the effective participation of women in economic activities (Bachelet, 2012). This could be unearthed from the involvement of women in different forms of the market in the economy viz. financial market, product market, and labor market, not necessarily on the demand side but on the supply side of services and products (Follett, 2018). What is disheartening is that if we probe into the status of women from these yardsticks of ‘active’ economic participation, the picture of gender equality appears more discouraging even in Kerala, which has, needless to say, been acclaimed as a ‘model’ for not only other states in the country but also for other countries in the world. To delve much into this aspect, we now analyze certain labor market

indices of women’s participation and involvement. Employment, of course, matters a lot as employment is regarded as the key to sexual equality and fulfillment (Gulati, 1981). Just look at the Work Participation Rate (WPR) of women in Kerala over the period from 1987-88 to 2011-12 (Table No.3). It is pretty curious to note that both in the rural and urban areas in Kerala, WPR for women had not only been declining, but it had been comparably lower than that of the men. A secular decline in WPR for women in the labor market, despite the high rate of education that they enjoy, clearly shows that education does not aid people to add themselves to the labor market. For instance, in 1987-88, WPR for males was 53.9 percent, whereas for females, it was 32.3 in rural areas in India. For Kerala, the respective percentages were 56.7 and 31.6. But in 2011-12, while in India for females, the WPR declined to 24.8, in Kerala, it declined to 22.1. The picture is slightly more worrisome for the urban areas in both India and Kerala. It is interesting to note that the WPR for females in urban areas in India in 1987-88 stood at 15.2, whereas for Kerala, it was pretty higher at 21.8. But, in 2011-12, while for females in urban centers in India, it plummeted to 14.7, for females in Kerala, it plummeted to 19.4. This lower female participation in the labor market becomes more visible from the data on unemployment in Kerala. 14.2 percent of women in rural areas and 13.9 in urban areas in Kerala were unemployed in 2011-12, whereas the corresponding rates for males stood at 3.1 and 2.7, respectively (Table No.4). Thus, it is obvious that Kerala has been facing the ignominy of living with the highest rate of female unemployment in the country (George, 2019). Still, what is noteworthy is that in Kerala, the WPR is comparably higher than that of the all India level. But the relatively sharp decline in WPR for women in urban areas calls for serious retrospection into the strategies of women empowerment in the State.

The pertinent question that raises the eyebrows of many is: where do these educated women naturally hide? Economists and sociologists offer many plausible explanations for this absconding nature of educated and skilled women from the labor market (Spain & Bianchi, 1999). One important explanation is that as women climb the ladder of education, they

do not intend to join the labor market at any point. They keep studying and moving from one course to another without offering themselves to the labor market. Suffice to say, the increased representation of women in higher education in Kerala, as discussed aforesaid, stands testimony to this argument, at least partially (Table No.2). Yet another but surprising explanation for the declining participation of women in the labor maker is nothing but the enhancement in the wage and salaries of their male counterparts (Jay & Nunn, 2018). The increasing labor market opportunities for the men and the consequent increase in their relative earnings have made the income of women almost redundant to support the

households. Hence, women keep themselves within the four walls of their family. Partially it could be true, but the evidence to support this argument hardly exists. The above discussion based on the WPR and the enrollment of women at different levels of education boils down that the education can no longer be singled out as a factor determining the economic participation of women in different types of markers like the labor market. This appears as a highly distinguishing feature of the Kerala economy. In some sense, it nullifies all claims regarding the accomplishments of high economic and social empowerment of women in Kerala.

Table 3: Work Participation Rate of Women in Kerala

Year	Rural				Urban			
	India		Kerala		India		Kerala	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
1987-88	53.9	32.3	56.7	31.6	50.6	15.2	59.2	21.8
1993-94	55.3	32.8	53.7	23.8	52.00	15.4	56	20.3
1999-2000	53.1	29.9	55.3	23.8	51.80	13.9	55.8	20.3
2004-05	54.6	32.7	55.9	25.6	54.9	16.6	54.7	20
2009-10	54.7	26.1	56.4	21.8	54.3	13.8	54.7	19.4
2011-12	54.3	24.8	56.5	22.1	54.6	14.7	55.2	19.1

Source: Various Reports of NSSO

Table 4: Unemployment Rates in 2011-12 in Percentage

States/Nation	Rural			Urban		
	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total
Kerala	14.2	3.1	6.8	13.9	2.7	6
India	1.7	1.7	1.7	5.2	3	3.4

Source: Women and Men in India, 2017

The most awesome thing that perhaps underlines the gravity of gender disparity is the difference in the wages or salaries between men and women. In a progressive economy, there should not be a wide disparity in respect of the wage/salaries between men and women. It is estimated that in Kerala, among the casual laborers, men receive almost double that of women (George, 2019). The disparity between the male and female wage is evident from the fact that while in rural Kerala, male earns Rs 363.44, female earns only 240.45 (Table 5). The same is the story in the case of urban areas as well. There have been structural changes in the labor market participation of women in Kerala, which is a good sign of the

improvement in the working pattern of women commensurate with the structural changes in the economy (Duarte, Sarasa, & Serrano, 2018).

Table 5: Average Wage/Salary per day per Employee Gender

Gender	Area	Kerala	India
Female	Rural	240.45	201.56
	Urban	412.47	366.15
Male	Rural	363.44	322.28
	Urban	519.84	469.87

Source: Women and Men in India, 2016

It is found that nearly 38 percent of women in Kerala work in the service sector, whereas it is only

17 percent at the all India level (George, 2019). It needs to be reiterated here that in 1991 80 percent of women in Kerala were engaged in the agriculture sector while only 30 percent were in the service sector (Thomas, 1995). However, due to the shift of men from agriculture sector to the industrial sector and service sector, it has now been observed that participation of female in agriculture and allied activities appear high both in India and Kerala.

Women Participation in Decision Making

Having observed some disquieting pictures that invalidate the much-celebrated gender status in Kerala, now we move on to have a glance at some rosy pictures of women empowerment in Kerala. It

is well known that women’s role in decision making at the household level encapsulates the wide canvass of women empowerment in many senses (Bayeh, 2016). This is because many women, despite having high education and other entitlements, do not have much say in the process of decision making at the household level, and often these women bow their heads before the commands of others in the household (Riaz, 2018). This runs contrary to the spirit of women’s empowerment. Having said so, measuring women’s participation in decision making is easier said than done. Yet, some indicators could be used to ascertain the extent of participation of women in decision making (Chaudhary, 2012).

Table 6: Women’s Participation in Decision Making

Indicators	India			Kerala		
	Urban	Rural	Total	Urban	Rural	Total
Married Women Participating in Household decisions in %	85.8	83	84	91.7	92.4	92.1
Women having a bank account that they themselves operate	61	48.5	53	70.3	70.8	70.6
Women having a mobile phone they them themselves use	61.8	36.9	45.9	81.1	81.2	81.2

Source: Women and Men in India, 2017.

Three indicators are used by National Family Health Survey (NFHS) in 2015-16 for this purpose: married women participating in the household decision, women having a bank account that they operate, and women having a cell phone that they use. According to NFHS, in Urban India, 85.8 percent of married women participate in the household decision-making process, while in urban Kerala, it stands at 91.7 percent. The picture appears more encouraging for rural Kerala. 92.4 percent of married women in rural Kerala take part in the household decision-making process, whereas at the all-India level, only 83 percent influence household decisions. Women in Kerala, both in the rural and urban areas, stand out compared to the national level in the case of both having and using a bank account and cell phones. Near about 70 percent and 80 percent of females in Kerala use and operate their own savings bank and mobile phones.

Conclusion

It is obvious from the preceding discussion that the much-celebrated gender status that Kerala enjoys has not translated into the participation of women

in the labor market. The high health and education status that the women have attained show that women in Kerala appear to be the mere passive recipients of benefits rather than the active agents of socio-economic transformation. The real gender inclusion and women empowerment will be fulfilled only when women start actively engaging in productive fields using their knowledge and entitlements.

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