



Gender Equality in an Unequal World – The Story of Kerala

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ABSTRACT

Good health and education levels of women cannot lead to gender equality in an environment of caste hierarchy and inequalities. With women constituting almost 52% of its total population of 33.3 million, this is evident in Kerala, a little state in the south of India. It has achieved enviable social development indicators, with limited resources. Its achievements in the areas of universal primary and secondary education, favourable female-male ratios, high literacy rates, low maternal mortality rates, and superior life expectancy rates are a pride not only for the state but also for the country. But, even though women are educated and healthy, they continue to remain economically weak and institutionally voiceless, all the progressive policies for more than half a century notwithstanding. The inequities that existed in the State less than 100 years ago, continue to haunt its society. Structural inequalities based on caste, class and religion pervade the social, economic, and political spaces that further cement the existing gender inequalities and unfair stereotypes. In a highly patriarchal and caste-dominated society, the approach to gender equality and women's empowerment cannot be solely focused on gender or on women. A new, bold and comprehensive approach is needed to address these underlying inequalities, if the objectives of gender equality are to be achieved.

Gender Equality in Kerala - An Impossible Dream?

I. Introduction

1. **The Constitution of India emphasizes that both women and men enjoy equal rights in social, economic, and political matters, and prohibits discrimination on the grounds of sex.** The Constitution gives importance to equal rights and opportunities in three dimensions: (i) social; (ii) economic; and (iii) political. The first dimension, the social sphere, covers education and health, although only the education dimension is discussed here because of its relevance to the reform movement. The second dimension, the economic sphere, focuses on how women's rights to assets, resources, and opportunities have evolved in the labour market and the home. It also focuses on some of the more successful Government programs in the area. The political sphere, the third dimension, focuses on the participation and voice of women in domestic, administrative and justice institutions. This article utilises the above framework (Figure 1) to discuss 'gender equality'.

2. **The Constitution of India, however, imposed the idea of equality and non-discrimination on a highly hierarchical society of the country that existed in 1950.** It imposed a vision that was structurally and socially diametrically opposed to the predominantly feudal and hierachal majority. The Constitution focused on equal rights of men and women in the law but maintained caste, abolishing only untouchability, ensuring from the start that some women were not equal to other women. This reflected the beginning of a complex situation for women struggling between equality and inequality and between two different structural and cultural visions. It was a new vision, an aspiration, in which many women and men themselves did not have the luxury of believing. Today, almost three-fourths of a century later, while there has been progress in some areas, the core structural and cultural foundations of gender appear to have become more complex and embedded within multiple and deeply layered inequalities that do not appear to have disappeared but strengthened in more ways than one (Singh, *n.d.*).

3. **This article discusses the status of women's empowerment and gender equality in Kerala, a small state on the south-west of India.** Kerala is known for the effectiveness of its development model and for its progressive approach in dealing with inequality, including empowering women. After this introductory section, the article first introduces the status of gender equality in Kerala. It then discusses why, despite some favourable policies, good grassroots-level organisation, and targeted programs for women's empowerment, progress has been uneven in the three dimensions (Figure 1).

4. **The study finds that the hype about gender equality or even women's empowerment in Kerala is not fully supported.** It is indeed a glass half full! In the social dimension, the State has progressed well and has eliminated gender disparity at the primary and secondary levels. At the tertiary level, women are the majority raising concerns about young men. In the other two dimensions, progress is much more modest in achieving gender equality in the State. In the economic dimension, women continue to remain economically weak with their labour force participation rate much lower

than that of men and lower than the national average. Women's ownership of assets and land remain low compared to that of men, despite the state being lauded for its matrilineal traditions. In the political dimension, women are powerless when compared to men, except where reservations have ensured their participation through law. Whether it is the legislature, the judiciary, or the administrative services, women's participation is notably lower than of men in Kerala. It concludes by discussing the need for bolder policies and programs, namely a cohesive equality policy and approach to designing, implementing and monitoring development interventions, facilitating an environment for economic opportunities for women, and engaging men in the process of achieving gender equality.

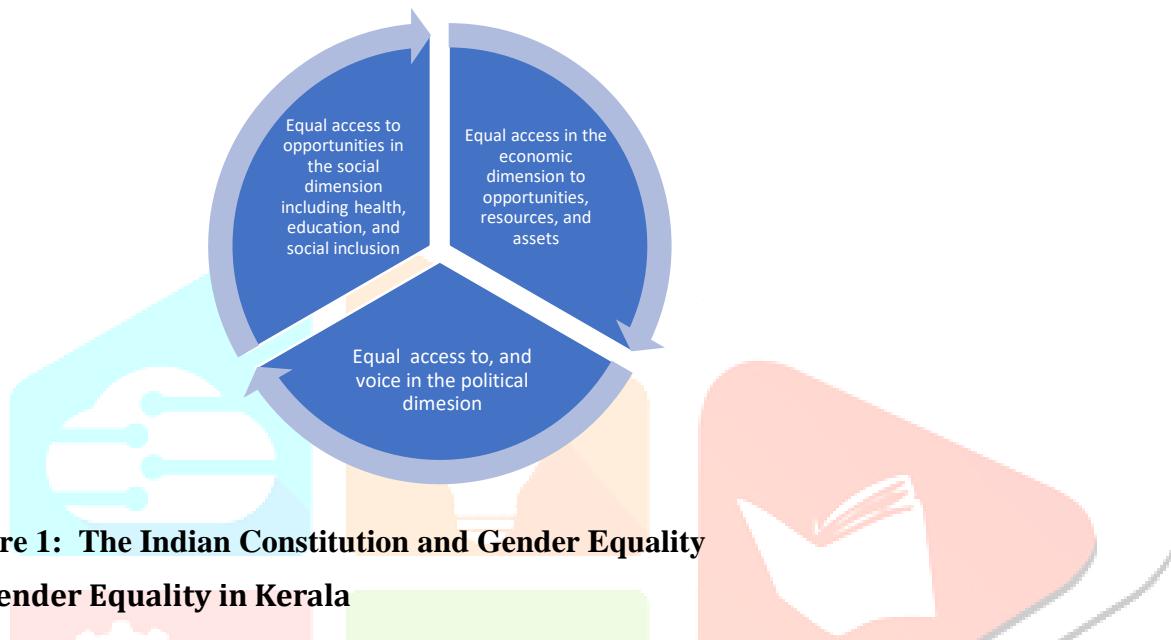


Figure 1: The Indian Constitution and Gender Equality

II. Gender Equality in Kerala

5. **With women constituting almost 52% of its total population of 33.3 million, Kerala has achieved enviable social development indicators.** Its achievements in the areas of universal primary and secondary education, favourable female-male ratios, high literacy rates, and superior life expectancy rates are a pride not only for the state but also for the country. Not devaluing this tremendous achievement, an examination of women's status in the state through the lens of gender equality, however, presents an unfavourable view. In a highly patriarchal and caste-dominated society, good education and health do not automatically translate into gender equality or even women's empowerment. This actually results in cementing these inequities in an invisible manner that then become very difficult to tackle through public policies and programs.

6. **The Kerala Human Development Report (2005) noted that gender discrimination poses perhaps one of two “most serious challenges to continued human development in Kerala, cutting across categories such as class, caste, religion, and age.”** Five years later, the Planning Commission's Economic Review (2010) also pointed out that although healthy and educated, the percentage of women in the labour markets was lower than it was at the national level, suggesting the need to rethink how to address some critical constraints to gender equality.

7. **In Kerala, in its approach to equality, the story was not different.** The concept of equality for men and women was never part of its ethos, mindset, or narrative. Neither did society have the time to evolve – it has been only 71 years since the Constitution declared equality for men and women. Even today caste and religion continue, implicitly or explicitly, to be the main variables around which the majority of society function in the state as in other parts of the country.

8. **The Government's policy and programs initially focused on women and development and subsequently on women's empowerment.** This changed in 2014. Given that the first-generation gender issues related to health and education were effectively addressed in the state, State Government issued a 'Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Policy' in 2014. This policy aimed to achieve gender equality and women's empowerment and adopted 'gender mainstreaming' as the way forward. It was a bold step given that the national policy of the Government of India continued to focus on women's empowerment. But, this change of direction in the State was never fully reflected in government programs or monitoring systems, which continued as before.

9. **The next section looks at how gender equality and women's empowerment has evolved in key areas in the three dimensions of the Constitutional framework.** It focuses on education in the first dimension; on work employment, unpaid at home work, and assets in the second dimension; and on the participation of women in key decision making that affects their lives in the third dimension.

Education of Women in Kerala

10. **Two social reformers in the late eighteenth century from the so-called lower castes persuaded their communities to question the assumption that education was not meant for certain sections of society.** They chipped away at the foundation of a carefully crafted perverse social structure maintained in the name of religion and generated a strong demand for education for the marginalised majority in Kerala. These indigenously-grown, spiritual, and peaceful revolutions, led predominantly by these social leaders, supported by the British and the church, became the catalyst in Kerala that ignited an internal demand for education among the lower castes.

11. **Narayana Guru (1854–1928), a member of a disadvantaged caste, championed the social and economic empowerment of the poorest and lower-caste women and men, stressing on their education and economic empowerment.** He learned Sanskrit, forbidden to the people of his caste, used religious tenets of the Advaita philosophy to effectively discredit the distorted and stubborn caste system and its abominable concepts of purity. Through his spiritual interventions, he not only empowered the downtrodden, but also caused a strong demand for education that could not have been created through any top-down government order or law.

12. **Ayenkali was born in 1863 into an 'untouchable' household, which had received some land in return for their labour from their feudal lord.** He and his supporters fought to claim the public spaces from which their communities continued to be barred, and it was only by 1900, his community (considered the lowest in- or outside the caste hierarchy) acquired the right to use most public roads. He too focussed on education. His attempt to enrol a girl from the untouchable caste into a government school, perhaps one of the first battles for women's empowerment, faced violent resistance. But Ayenkali was not disheartened; he organized, what may have been yet another first, a strike by agricultural labourers who worked in the fields of the upper castes. Although belaboured and tired at the end of a year-long strike, Ayenkali and his supporters did not give up until the Government agreed to completely remove restrictions on education. Ayenkali also successfully fought to end the discriminatory practice against women from his community, which required them to bare their breasts before the higher castes, a system that had been abolished for women from other lower castes several decades ago (Nair, 1976).

13. **These indigenous mass movements triggered demand for education among women and men from socially disadvantaged communities.** Schools were, however, in place to meet the demand. In 1817, the then ruling royal family had issued a proclamation that "the state should defray the entire cost of education of its people in order that there might be no backwardness in the spread of enlightenment among them, that by diffusion of education they might become better subjects and public servants and that the reputation of the state might be advanced thereby." Encouraged by the proclamation, the missionaries also established schools. Given both demand and supply, both girls and boys were sent to school from rich and poor households, whether from the upper castes or lower. They increasingly obtained access to education and public spaces. As a result, according to Robin Jeffrey (1976), in as early as 1921, 34% of the Nair women, and 31% of the Syrian Christian women were literate. After independence, Kerala became the state with the highest level of education, and with a progressive government leadership thereafter, the state soon achieved gender parity in primary, secondary and even tertiary education (Kerala State Economic Review, 2016).

14. **Three issues are still of importance for Kerala in the area of education.** First, the gender disparity at the tertiary level needs to be addressed. Boys form only about one-third of the enrolments at this level. Second, the low Gross Enrolment Rate (GER) for both women and men at the tertiary level is a worrying fact in an economy that is aiming to be knowledge-driven (Table 1). Third, the quality of education still remains weak. A recent study shows that employability of the graduates in Kerala is alarmingly low. For a state with highest literacy, Kerala does not figure in the top ten states by some accounts, when it comes to the employability index (Confederation of Indian Industry, 2020). However, discussion of possible remedies for these issues are not within the scope of this article and are not pursued further.

Table 2. Access to Education.

	Kerala		India		Sri Lanka	USA	China
Gross Enrolment Rate (GER)	Male	Female	Male	Female	GER 2015	GER 2015	GER 2015
Elementary	95.10	95.76	94.5	99.6	101.7	100.2	104.1
Higher Secondary	102.31	103.58	79.16	80.97	98.5	102.1	99.1
Senior Secondary	72.88	82.44	55.95	56.41	99.1	138.2	89.7
Tertiary	26.6	35.0	25.4	23.4	19.8	93.3	43.4

Source: Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2018.

Economic Empowerment of Women.

15. **This section looks at women's access to economic resources, the second dimension in the framework for gender equality.** The reform movement, however, generated no demand for economically independent women; it was not about gender but about caste. The Manusmriti state that "a woman must never seek to live independently." Kerala may not have fully embraced the stand in the Manusmriti given the dominance of matrilineal communities, but its overall stand had not been much different. While inheritance was through the female lineage (matrilineal) among most Hindu castes, assets were always under the management of the maternal uncle. These practices undoubtedly had certain advantages for women – a firm knowledge that the women and their children could not be thrown out of their homes given that the patrilocal practices, no life-long subjugation to a man (a relationship she could terminate by leaving his shoes and umbrella outside her door), no prohibition on appearing in the public without covering one's head, and the role models of royal women who made decisions and met foreigners. (Jeffrey, 1976) But these practices were gradually reversed with the codification of Hindu laws in the fifties and the communities adopting the patriarchal practices of the British. The British also could not understand matrilineal systems, having given married women control over their property only as late as in 1870 through the Married Women's Property Act. Thus, despite the early promise of the reform movement, education did not have had a transformative impact on gender relations or the mindsets of the people.

16. **Women's labour participation has always been and continues to remain low.** The Kerala State Economic Review (2019) found that the female labour participation rate had decreased from 31.1% in 2013 to 27.4% in 2015. Moreover, some studies (Mathew, 2015; Pandey, *n.d.*; Velayudhan, 2020) have found that women with a lower economic status in Kerala are more likely to work than those with a higher economic status **and** that women whose husbands are employed in a medium- or low-status work or bring in remittances are less likely to enter the labour market. Sebastian and

Navaneetham (2012) found that 36% women from low-class backgrounds and 16% of women from middle-class backgrounds are part of the paid labour force. The figure for women from high-class backgrounds is 29%. The Kerala Government Gender Budget 2021-22 Report for the annual budget noted: '[t]he latest Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) for 2018-19 reveals a substantial increase in female workforce rates (Usual Principal and Subsidiary Status) in Kerala from 16.4% in 2017-18 to 20.4% in 2018-19 (the all India rate has gone up from 16.5% to 17.6%); largely in rural areas and in self-employment and casual work'. Thus, while it appears to have increased, the numbers actually remain disappointingly low for a state with high percentage of educated women.

17. The structural transformation that took place in the labour market from a predominantly agrarian economy to an industrial economy has not benefitted women. Women continue to dominate the primary sector. About one-third of the women (31.9%) are engaged in the agricultural sector (men, 22.8%). In the industrial sector, there is less disparity with 32.4% of women and 30.4% of men working in the sector (Ministry of Statistics and Program Implementation. (2019b)) but when further disaggregated, it is found that large numbers of women are engaged in low-productivity, labour-intensive traditional industries like handlooms, Khadi, coir, and cashew (Kerala State Economic Review, 2019). More than one-third of women (37.7%) work in the service sector (men, 44.8%). They are also part of the contractual workers, subject to all sorts of exploitation (including not being allowed to sit or even go to the washroom during working hours) and subject to dismissal at any time (Velayudhan, 2020).

18. The majority of women are engaged in vulnerable employment in the country (Asian Development Bank & International Labour Organization, 2011). Despite their education, this is true in Kerala too. Women constitute a high proportion among the low-skilled informal worker category, and are engaged in low-productivity and low-paying work. Similarly, *Women and Men in India* (Ministry of Statistics and Program Implementation, 2019b) finds that about 60% of women in rural and about 56% in urban Kerala are either self-employed or work as casual labour whereas 70% of those who worked in salaried jobs did not have a written contract. Among the casual labour, 95% of the workers have no written contract and only 35% of women and 22% of the men could have paid leave in their job. The report also found that only 10% of workers had pension, only 3% had gratuity, and only 9% had health care and maternity benefits. Moreover, a majority of those in the lowest realms of labour market are likely to be from the socially disadvantaged castes such as SCs and STs.

19. Many women in the service sector are domestic workers. A Domestic Worker's Welfare Board has been set up by the Government of Kerala, and domestic workers have been included as members of the Kerala Artisan and Skilled Workers Welfare Fund, which allows them to avail social security schemes (John, 2004). The Labour and Skills Department of Kerala periodically announces revised minimum wages for household workers. It also prescribes some minimum wages, terms and conditions for domestic workers, although wages are set very low. The Sexual Harassment of Women

at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, aimed at preventing sexual harassment, also applies to domestic workers. While such efforts have been made to safeguard the rights of domestic workers, they need to be much stronger to actually protect their work environment and their implementation needs to be improved so that all domestic workers receive decent benefits and are given adequate legal protection against exploitation.

20. The **unemployment rate for women, almost triple that of men, in the state today is one of the highest in the country**. While employment may reflect a choice made by women, unemployment rate in the state reflects inequality: 23% for women and 6.4% for men (Ministry of Statistics and Program Implementation, 2019b). However, what is worrying is the unemployment rate of youth aged 18-29, who constitute 23% of the population: 32.5% for the rural areas and 41.5% for the urban areas. Gender disparities are large, and area-wise data shows that 61.7% of rural female population is unemployed whereas unemployment in the rural male population is 20.5%. In the urban areas, 65.2% of females are unemployed while 27.4% of males are unemployed (Kerala State Economic Review, 2019). According to this report, youth unemployment is prevalent in Kerala because young people lack adequate skills, work experience, etc. in the emerging areas of employment. The number of female registered job seekers is also nearly double that of male job seekers, suggesting that women face more difficulties in finding jobs even in cases when they choose to work (Live Register, 2021).

21. **Wage discrimination continues.** According to the Kerala State Economic Review (2019), significant gender inequality in wages exists in Kerala. Gender disparities in wage rate are prevalent not only in the informal or unorganised sector but also in regular or salaried employment. According to the *Gender Statistics Report 2016-17* of the Government of Kerala, men casual laborers are paid almost twice (rural: 345.14; urban: 335.76) what their female counterpart are (rural: 169.61; urban: 167.56), making the gender gap much higher than that at the country level. *Women and Men India* (Ministry of Human Resource Development (2019b) show less gender disparity in public works with women receiving Rs. 386 in rural areas and Rs. 351 in urban areas while men receiving Rs. 425 and Rs. 438 for public works.

22. **The 2019 Time Use Survey (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2019a) confirms the pattern of gendered roles within the household in Kerala.** The burden of unpaid domestic and care work is high on women and which, to some extent, must contribute to women staying away from the market. The majority of women (90.5%) participate in unpaid domestic services, while only about one-third of the men do so. Women spent an average of 5.4 hours on unpaid domestic services, three times more than men, who spend 1.7 hours on the average. In addition, about 36.1% of women participate in unpaid caregiving services to family members. About 20% of the men also do so. To put this in some perspective, in the US in 2019, on an average day, 85% of women and 71% of men spent some time doing household activities, such as housework, cooking, lawn care, or household management. On the days they did household activities, women spent an average of 2.5 hours on these activities, while men spent 1.9 hours (American Time Use Survey, 2020).

23. Women's access to economic resources outside the labor markets also remains weak. According to the NHFS-5 survey, the percentage of women who owned a house and or land alone or jointly has come down from 34.9% in 2015-16 to 27.3% in 2019-20. This is consistent with the Building Statistics Report of the Government of Kerala (2015-2016), which documents that only about 27% of the private buildings in Kerala were owned by women, ranging between 21% in Ernakulam district and 36% in Trivandrum.

Equality in Politics only with Reservation

24. **Women are not a significant part of the decision-making process in the state governance, which continues to be male-dominated.** Despite 50% women's representation in panchayats (enforced by law in 2009), three ministers in a cabinet of more than 25 and eight women legislators among 140 is low by even the Indian standard. Patriarchal practices of political parties and male-defined ways of engagement (aggressive and adversarial) combined with social attitudes towards women have brought only a few talented women into the political arena. At the local levels, where 50% of the seats are reserved for women, there is some evidence that such reservations are leading to changed perceptions about women in positions of leadership at least in some states (World Bank, 2012), but the progress is slow and meagre for women to have meaningful participation in key decision-making areas.

25. **Representation of women in the judiciary, another male-dominated decision-making body, is weak at all levels.** The implications of such an all-male institution for judicial decisions can only be imagined because it has not been studied in depth. It remains a concern that justice at the apex level is meted out through a dominantly patriarchal lens. Although women may exhibit equally conservative views, the judiciary is deprived of women's perspective at all levels. In India, on average, there are about 7% of women in the judiciary. As of November 2020, 2 out of a total of 27 judges in the Supreme Court, mostly appointed in the recent past were women. In Kerala, where 20% of advocates in the court system are women, 4 out of a total of 29 High Court judges are women at present. At the lower-level courts in Kerala, women are reported to constitute about 28.6% of the judges.

26. **The Indian Administrative Service (IAS) is not much better.** For every 20 male IAS officers, there are only three female officers in India. Since 1974, there have been only 687 women compared to more than 3,000 men selected for this prestigious position. There appears to be an effort to increase women's representation and the average intake into the IAS was about 22% between 2004-2009. While it is encouraging to see that 9 out of 14 district collectors in Kerala are women, gender parity still remains an elusive concept for the state of Kerala (Gulf News. 2021).

27. Statistics from the National Crime Records Bureau indicate that Kerala ranks tenth in terms of rates of violence against women (crimes per 1,00,000). In terms of rape, Kerala is the second top state. Almost 99.2% of the rapes are committed by family friends, neighbours, employers, or other known persons in Kerala. While this may not be unusual, what is equally, if not more, disconcerting is the high number of cases pending investigation and low rate of conviction (Table 2).

State	Conviction rate of crimes against women	Pendency of cases against women %	Rape rate against women above 18 years	Rape rate against women below age 18	Crimes against women (overall) (rate)
Andhra Pradesh	8.1	76.4	2.1	4.2	67.9
Bihar	16	96.1	1.3	1.3	14.4
Karnataka	4.8	13.5	1.6	0	62.7
Kerala	13.4	93.5	4.2	6.9	69.0
Tamil Nadu	18.3	84.7	0.9	0	15.6
National	23.7	91.2	4.0	0.8	62.4

Notes:

Rate of crime against Women means number of crimes against women per one lakh population.

The higher number of rapes may also reflect the ability to complain, which may be limited in other states.

Source: National Crimes Record Bureau, 2019.

28. Violence against women, a factor that hinders women's voice, is prevalent in Kerala both at home and in the workspace. Overall, only 13% of women in Kerala reported suffering physical and sexual violence (NHFS-5 Kerala Report). Emotional violence is, however, not part of the definition. Such low figures could be a result of underreporting (Joseph et al., 2017). This said, in Kerala, which is the state with the highest human development index, women believe that wife-beating is justified if a woman neglects the house or children (49%), shows disrespect for her in-laws (46%), or if her husband suspects her of being unfaithful (40%). In the case of men, 58% say that wife-beating is justified in some circumstances, especially if the wife shows disrespect for her in-laws (47%) (NFHS-5 Kerala Report). Even among those who have completed at least 12 years of schooling, 52% of women and 56% of men say that a husband is justified in beating his wife for one or more of the above reasons (NHFS-V Kerala Report). Attitudes about gender-based violence are translated in the workplace. The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act was passed in

2013, but is not implemented in a transparent manner, with employers being able to get away with gross violations.

29. To conclude, women in Kerala are highly educated, but remain economically weak and politically powerless. The status of women is clearly mixed even when compared to other southern states of India as the results of NFHS-5 State Sheets indicate (Table 3).

Table 3. Comparison of Kerala with Other Southern States.

Indicators	Kerala	Andhra	Karnataka	Telangana
Women who worked in the last 12 months and were paid in cash (%)	25.8	42.1	30.5	45.1
Women owning a house and/or land (alone or jointly with others) (%)	27.3	47.8	67.6	66.6
Women who have ever used the internet (%)	61.1	35	35	26.5
Women having a bank or savings account that they themselves use (%)	78.8	81.8	88.7	84.4
Women having a mobile phone that they themselves use (%)	86.6	48.9	61.8	60
Ever-married women age 18-49 years who have ever experienced spousal violence27 (%)	9.9	30	44.4	36.9

Source: NHFS-5 Report (2019-2020).

Public Policies and Programs that have Helped Women

30. **The Government has focussed on women's empowerment.** It has launched several initiatives that provide livelihood to women through the rural wage guarantee program (NREGA), Ayyankali Urban Employment Guarantee Scheme, and support for self-employment and through Kudumbashree microenterprises. Specific steps have also been taken to address issues of violence against women and children during the lockdown. A few are discussed below.

31. **Over the last 18 or so years, Kudumbashree, a unique government-supported program, has initiated many activities to empower women at the grassroots-levels.** These include peer support for women, fighting domestic violence, improving women's bargaining power, supporting enforcement of their rights, and providing them access to affordable collateral-free credit to initiate group or individual income-generating activities or to meet urgent personal needs such as medical or education of children. Kudumbashree helps to link these groups to banks and supports their activities, through which they could earn some income. Today, it runs thousands of microenterprises in fields as diverse as food processing and handicraft and cosmetics, in addition to paddy cultivation that stands at 1,57,926 acres. A 2016 study found that participants showed increase in savings and investments and economic empowerment through participation in Kudumbashree (Pushpa & Sarvana, 2016). According to a 2017 report (Kannan & Raveendran, 2017), the percentage of participants whose primary focus was to attend to domestic duties decreased from 67% to 37% after they joined Kudumbashree.

32. **To support unskilled labour, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), a rights-based safety net program, was introduced in 2006.** It is managed by local governments. It has been found that women increased their self-esteem, self-image and confidence levels through their participation under MGNREGS (Dheeraja & Rao, 2010). More than 90% of the participants in Kerala are women. An unpublished study by Vijayanand and Jithendran (2008) concluded that despite the need for some improvement, the program has been successful. The scheme has helped in increasing the savings of women and the payment of wages directly into their bank accounts has helped not only to increase their financial literacy but also given them better access to their own funds (Breitkreuz (2017). The actual demand for employment increased from 9.5 lakhs during 2009-10 to 16.71 lakhs during 2012-13, with more than 99% of the demands being met. The rate of participation of women in Kerala in MGNREGS has remained steady at 90% over the last five years (Kerala National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme. 2020-2021). This has provided an effective social safety net to the women from low-income backgrounds. Some studies also show that real wages, specifically for women, have increased in the rural areas after implementation of the scheme (Chandrashekhar & Ghosh, 2011). Similar to MGNREGS, the Ayyankali Urban Employment Guarantee Scheme (AUEGS) guarantees hundred days of waged employment in a year to an urban household whose adult members volunteer for unskilled manual work. About 2.6 million person-days were created under this scheme in 2021-22), providing work for 9662 women and 862 men (AUEGS Kerala data accessed on December 2, 2021).

33. **Successive governments have taken steps to support women's economic independence through entrepreneurship.** Micro- and small-sized enterprises are growing areas for women, with significant incentives from the state governments. In 2013, the largest share in the number of establishments under women entrepreneurship was: Tamil Nadu (13.51%) followed by Kerala (11.35%), Andhra Pradesh (10.56%), West Bengal (10.33%) and Maharashtra (8.25%) (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2013). This said, only about 5% of the women-owned entrepreneurs actually hired labour; the majority are run using their own (or family) labour (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2013). About 94.5% of the women entrepreneurs in Kerala rely on their own sources for funding to initiate and operate the business (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2013), which allows little or limited expansion. Women entrepreneurs in Kerala have mentioned several problems such as deep cultural biases that vitiate all institutions, and a lack of resources such as finances, capital training, access to markets, transportation and development they face (Korreck, 2019).

34. **State governments have provided social safety nets to workers in the informal sectors.** Today, the state pays a non-contributory pension to approximately 48 lakh beneficiaries under five categories. However, identifying the poor can be challenging as governments often lack reliable information about incomes. There appear to be exclusion errors in targeting beneficiaries and weak monitoring of whether the benefits actually reach the poor and vulnerable. Successive Kerala Budgets have also offered many services to women to encourage women's participation in the labour markets, although implementation has been weak.

III. Why have Women still not Achieved Equality Despite all the Progressive Measures?

35. **While there is no definitive answer to this paradox of educated women remaining educated but poor and powerless, several reasons have been suggested.** These include weak links between labour demands and supply, the proliferation of tertiary education and consequent changed expectations of 'acceptable' employment, decreased rice cultivation, reducing the need for female labour, switch to cash crops and replacement of women's labour by immigrant male labour, the stagnation of the household and small-scale industry, migration of industries to other states due to labour unions, and rigid gender roles.

36. **Kerala has already taken its first big step towards the constitutional promise of gender equality.** It has succeeded where many other states have failed – to educate its women and ensure access to basic services. But, while it has invested in the human development of women, it is not reaping the benefits of this investment. At the economic level, women are still to find equal access to and control over resources, be it through employment or access to household assets. The higher proportion of women on the unemployment list is a testimony of the fact that even the women who seek jobs cannot find them. At the political level, women have started to whisper at the panchayat level, but their voices are unheard in key decision-making arenas, which are almost completely dominated

by males. Violence against women within the home appears to be increasing, although it is unclear to what extent because of higher levels of reporting. Clearly, there are miles to go before the Constitutional promise can be achieved.

37. **The context of gender in Kerala is, however, unique: women are educated and healthy, but apparently poor and powerless when assessed by the indicators used to assess women's empowerment in the economic and political sphere.** Given this, typical approaches of top-down policies and programs are not going to work by themselves. While it would be important for the government to follow a considered strategy for women's empowerment and to support gender mainstreaming, three findings make it imperative that the demand-side for gender equality also be urgently addressed.

Structural inequalities ensure that progress made is not sustainable

38. **Structural inequalities that stand in the way of the second generation of progress in women's empowerment.** In 1975, Sri Namboodari Pad (Former Chief Minister of Kerala) in his article on "Perspectives of the Women's Movement" (Namboodari Pad, 1975) lamented the state of women in India, noting that 28 years after the British left the country there were many remnants of the old beliefs such as women should never be free: they should obey their father in childhood, their husbands in youth, and their sons in the old age. He spoke about the force of many progressive laws favouring women being thwarted by the force of tradition and other factors, particularly the economic ones. Much of these concerns unfortunately persist to this day.

39. **Caste, class and religion help to maintain a culture of gender inequality in the State.** The recent protests in Kerala against the Supreme Court decision to allow women of all ages entry into the Sabrimala temple were certainly surprising, coming from a literate and educated polity, very conscious of their rights in all situations! The protests were highly reminiscent of those that social reformists faced when they fought for temple entry, the right for lower-caste individuals to walk on roads near a temple, and to allow women to cover their breasts. It was a public revival of the concept of purity.

40. **Gender is not a woman's primary identity today.** Their dominant identities are first influenced by their political, religious or caste affiliations. This is unlike the framework within which women participated in the nationalist movement, where the uniting force was nationalism (Velayuddhan 1994), or even during the years when the right to education was being fought for where it affected all under-privileged women and men, who constituted the majority. It is thus challenging to bring women together on a common platform to fight for gender equality despite the veneer of modernity in the State.

41. **Well-functioning and inclusive markets can help redress gender inequalities, but this will not be automatic.** Inequalities based on gender, caste, class and religion influence an individual's access to economic and social services (Arun, 2017; Mosse, 2018). The low levels of transparency and competition in how markets function help inequalities and not redress them.

42. **The role of arranged marriages and its centrality in the social and cultural lives of Keralan society helps to maintain women's subjugation.** Employment for women is only a goal for a few. Educating girls, many mothers say, is to get them better husbands. Divorce is equally frowned on and remarriage is not encouraged. Weakening of these traditional institutions and emancipation of women and ensuring their right to make decisions about their lives will have far reaching social implications, which is why it is perhaps highly resisted and slow to change.

43. **Furthermore, achieving gender equality will require that men and boys take full ownership and responsibility and engage side-by-side with women to support gender equality.** Stereotypes about men and women influence all three dimensions – social, economic, and political. Societal attitudes such as the near consensus on the superiority of men (even among the erstwhile matrilineal communities), marriage as the main goal for young girls, male-as-the-breadwinner thinking, restricted mobility of women, arranged marriages, and concepts about women's proper and subordinate place in the family are practices and attitudes that are universal and unaffected by education and keep women from achieving real equality.

44. **Kerala is an aging community, reflective of the high levels of development in the state (Kerala State Economic Review 2020).** These demographic changes, however, pose formidable challenges for the state, its families and the elderly, particularly women. Among the senior citizens, while only 8.8% of the men are widowed, about 57% of the women are so. Women outlive men by an average of six years. Thus, the problems confronting them are exacerbated.

45. **COVID-19 pandemic has increased the vulnerability of all, but particularly women.** Recent findings regarding employment show a notable gender disparity between men and women in losing their job. Thirty-six out of 100 men working in December 2019 lost their work during the lockdown, and another four did after the lockdown in August. For women the numbers were alarmingly high. For every 100 women employed during the same time, 74 lost their jobs during the lockdown, and another 11 subsequently (Abraham, Basole, & Kesar. 2021). Women have suffered from increased domestic violence, particularly during periods of strict lockdown as reported by the Kerala Police, which established Domestic Conflict Resolution Centres across the State.

Policy Fragmentation Resulting in Multiple Approaches

46. **The approach to addressing gender issues is fragmented in Kerala.** The state issued a gender equality and women's empowerment policy in 2014. At the same time, the State Planning Board follows a process of 'gender budgeting'. At the local self-government levels, they follow the

government's order of minimum 10% of the plan budget be allocated to address women's strategic issues.

47. The current gender equality and women's empowerment policy has remained mostly in the books. The current approach of the State Government focusses on women not based on their gender, the latter being a term utilised to describe projects or programs for women. Under the state policy, a state-wide gender action was formulated but its implementation and monitoring was weak. Although a capacity development plan was formulated, none of this was effectively followed through.

48. Gender budgeting is promoted by the State's Planning Board in Kerala. About 18.4% of the total state plan outlay in 2020-21 was spent on women-focussed initiatives. While the focus in budgeting is admirable, such an approach works well in countries with sophisticated systems of budgeting including measurable outputs and clearly-linked budget allocations as well as availability of data about the gender-differentiated impact of various policies. A good harmonised monitoring system that focuses on measurable outputs, facilitates understanding of the impact of different policies and programs, and feeds back for a better gender budgeting is an essential component of gender budgeting. Without these essential preconditions, gender budgeting in Kerala results in merely ensuring an outlay for wholly women-centric schemes. It focuses on macro-level resource allocation, and estimating the flow of budgetary resources to women poses a major challenge due primarily to non-availability of gender-disaggregated data. Very broad or vague instructions and guidelines are provided to different departments and local governments without any links to budget-specific policies and without gender-related output and outcome indicators. Most Departments and local governments design their own programs or projects for women, which leads to isolated and localised results that cannot contribute to women's sustainable empowerment, let alone gender equality.

49. At the local self-government levels (LSG), the approach focuses on the women's component plan (WCP). WCP was introduced during the 9th Five Year Plan. Instructions were that 10% of the Plan outlays for all departments should be mandatorily earmarked for women-specific projects. Key objectives of WCP included meeting the basic needs of women and on increasing the activities that improved the income and status of women. Thus, there was a conscious effort to mainstream gender in the local planning process. However, state government reports suggest that the use of these funds is not being maximised, particularly given the need for greater capacity at the local levels. The Comptroller and Audit General (CAG) report (Comptroller and Audit General, 2018) on LSG institutions for the year ending March 2017 points to a glaring under-utilisation of the allocated funds for women's projects. The report pointed out that only 2.39% (as opposed to the required 10%) of the total development funds were spent on WCP programs or projects. This has, however, improved and the State Economic Review of Kerala (2020) notes that 6.39% of the budget was spent on women's projects.

50. Thus, three distinct approaches without an umbrella framework leaves the gender landscape fragmented and ineffective. A thousand flowers bloom but the results remain either localised or not sustained. Monitoring of results becomes difficult because each scheme or program is monitored at different levels of governance and focusses mainly on inputs.

IV. The Way Forward...

51. No country in today's globalized and competitive world can leave half its population behind and expect to keep the house in order. Effective incentives are needed to change mindsets of both women and men, if Kerala is to prosper in the coming decades. This section suggests some broad approaches if Kerala is to build on its first-generation success and achieve an equal and equitable society in the State.

52. It is also important to stress that gender equality cannot be achieved in isolation without addressing other structural and institutionalised inequalities. Social constructs that perpetuate inequalities need to be simultaneously addressed, otherwise achieving gender equality will remain highly challenging. Development programs should be designed to tackle multi-dimensional barriers and discourage social structures that uphold inequalities. This poses major challenges even for the most liberal politician as was seen in the case of the Sabrimala ruling of the Supreme Court. Three broad suggestions, which should be treated as priority actions are made in this paper.

Formulate a Harmonious Policy Approach to Gender Equality

53. There is a need for a cohesive framework and a common results framework for achieving gender equality. It is important to ensure that the multiple and distinct approaches in Kerala (women's empowerment, gender budgeting, and gender equality) are embedded within a single results framework. It must be recognised that while these distinct approaches are complimentary, they will not be so unless implemented within a broad framework that allows them to support each other. While the state's Gender Policy (2014) already includes a results framework, the current approach in implementation completely ignores this framework, which has led to a situation where the State cannot state how it has contributed to gender equality and articulate the results.

54. For this, the State must ensure that it has a single cohesive policy at all levels of governance and among different key actors. The three different approaches – gender mainstreaming, gender budgeting, and women's component plan – must all be nested in a new gender policy with an integrated results and monitoring framework. This should be reformulated keeping the focus on the social context. A large number of women are confounded not only by the persistent and debilitating gender issues based on culture and social customs but also by caste and class. The policy must integrate these considerations in a seamless manner and must be developed in a consultative manner to create ownership among the marginalised groups. Furthermore, there is a need to focus on the pronounced gender inequalities based on conservative stereotypes that cut across castes and

religions, keeping in mind that simply focusing on women or on gender differences will not be effective in finding solutions to complex and intractable second-generation issues.

55. Institutions need to be geared up to implement the policy. Currently, there is a lack of understanding about the policy with many seeing it as a feminist agenda. Changing mindsets would require strong government measures, genuine commitment to and ownership of such a policy, and true leadership. All government departments and stakeholders receiving public funds must be required to prepare action plans for each institution, which should feed into an overall gender action plan.

56. The action plan to usher in equality must be resourced and linked to the budget to allow for a bottom-up planning. Currently, a poorly resourced Gender Advisor in Kerala coordinates the task without any real authority or independent resources. Such a unit must be sufficiently resourced, and the coordinator must be authorised to oversee implementation of the state policy, conduct rigorous analysis of policy performance, undertake equality audits and performance checks, and recommend policy changes as needed. It must be supported by an inter-departmental group of people to develop the State's gender action plan, support the implementation at the local government level, and monitor and evaluate the actions. The current, rather haphazard, way of doing things for women, however well-meaning, cannot be effective.

57. Finally, there is an urgent need to generate relevant data on policy impact and results. A monitoring system capturing outputs and early outcomes is essential, and there needs to be periodical evaluations of the impact of policies on equality. Without this, all results will remain conjectures at best without a real understanding of the tremendous efforts and resources spent on the subject.

Facilitating an Environment for Economic Opportunities for Women

58. The government must generate a demand for the participation of women in the labour market. A package of carefully thought-through measures is needed to bring women out of their homes. While creating a 'decent' employment for the educated is no doubt the first need in Kerala, there are several gender issues that must be addressed if women are to overcome the barriers to entering the labour markets. These include a wide range of actions such as skilling women to transition to the 21st century job markets; encouraging (at least in the interim) home-based entrepreneurship and business incubator services; facilitating access to computers, smart phones and other technology through low-interest loans; provision of affordable creches and day care centres for the elderly; giving tax benefits and incentives for working women/couples; allowing flexible work times; implementing equal wages for equal work; effectively addressing violence in the workplace; and ensuring improved infrastructure with basic facilities such as separate and functioning toilets with running water, to say the least.

Men need to be engaged in achieving gender equality

59. **As discussed earlier, achieving gender equality will require that men and boys take full ownership and engage side-by-side with women to support gender equality.** For this, two aspects are needed: one, to engage men to lead the process for change and to achieve gender equality; and (ii) to meticulously follow an approach of gender equality and provide men who are disadvantaged and falling behind (men from disadvantaged communities such as tribal and scheduled caste) equal opportunities to development opportunities. There has been significant resistance to such an approach, but it is time to take a strategic approach to bringing men into the Kerala's gender and development efforts. Men should be incentivised and included as participants or leaders in the battle for equality and the gender action plan must also address areas where men are falling back such as in education at the tertiary levels, and among disadvantaged communities.

60. **The principle of social freedom and equality were unimaginable in Kerala with its high caste-ridden social structure.** After seventy-odd years of Independence, the fervour that brought the whole country together is also diminishing, and the society is getting more and more fragmented along the lines of caste and religion. Multiple identities based on religion, caste, class, and race are gaining more prominence and gender is seen as a secondary or even tertiary consideration among these more primary constructs.

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