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Catalysts of Change: A Study on the Volunteerism within Kudumbashree Communities in Kannur District of Kerala

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ABSTRACT

Kudumbashree, Kerala's pioneering women-led poverty eradication and empowerment initiative, has played a significant role in enhancing women's socio-political engagement across the state, including Kannur district. This study examines the structural framework of Kudumbashree, assessing its influence on women's participation in political and leadership activities. A key focus is on the performance of Kudumbashree members in the 2015 and 2020 local body elections in Kannur district, highlighting their growing presence and effectiveness in governance. Additionally, the research explores Kudumbashree members' responses to leadership roles within various organizations, their ability to motivate others to participate in politics, and their perception of exercising free will in political participation. It also analyses their willingness to join and actively participate in different Kudumbashree units, as well as their voluntary involvement in election rallies and campaigns. By examining these aspects, the research aims to provide insights into how Kudumbashree fosters grassroots democracy and political empowerment among women. The findings contribute to a broader understanding of women's agency in governance and community leadership, shedding light on the challenges and opportunities in strengthening their political engagement.

Keywords:- ***Volunteerism, Community Participation, Self-Help Groups Neighbourhood Groups, Social Development, Rural Development, Financial Inclusion***

INTRODUCTION

Kudumbashree, launched in 1998 by the Government of Kerala, is one of the largest women-led community organizations in India, aimed at poverty eradication and women's empowerment. The initiative operates through a three-tiered structure of Neighbourhood Groups (NHGs), Area Development Societies (ADS), and Community Development Societies (CDS), fostering grassroots participation (Kudumbashree, 2021). Rooted in the principles of participatory governance, Kudumbashree has effectively combined microfinance, livelihood promotion, and social development initiatives to uplift marginalized women. By leveraging self-help groups (SHGs), it has enabled financial inclusion and economic independence for women, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas (Nair, 2019). Moreover, Kudumbashree collaborates with local self-government institutions to implement welfare programs, ensuring that women play a critical role in decision-making processes. The program's impact extends beyond economic dimensions to social empowerment, as it addresses gender disparities through capacity-building initiatives, skill development, and entrepreneurship support (Chathukulam& Joseph, 2020).

Kudumbashree's role in women's empowerment is evident in its contribution to financial self-sufficiency, leadership development, and social transformation. The microfinance program provides access to credit at lower interest rates, reducing women's dependence on informal moneylenders and strengthening their entrepreneurial capabilities (Thomas &Kurup, 2022). Additionally, Kudumbashree's livelihood programs, including agriculture, handicrafts, and micro-enterprises, have significantly improved household incomes and enhanced the social standing of women within their communities (Kumar & Nair, 2020). Its initiatives, such as gender resource centres and campaigns against domestic violence, have also played a vital role in raising awareness about women's rights and gender equity (George, 2021). Furthermore, the integration of Kudumbashree with Kerala's local governance system has facilitated women's active participation in democratic processes, ensuring their voices are heard in policy-making and community development (Vijayan, 2018). As a result, Kudumbashree stands as a model for sustainable women-centric development, demonstrating how decentralized governance and community mobilization can lead to holistic empowerment.

Concept of volunteerism and its relevance in rural development

Volunteerism, defined as the voluntary, community-oriented engagement in activities without material gain, plays a crucial role in fostering social cohesion and individual well-being (Willems et al., 2022). Recent studies indicate that volunteering not only enhances social networks but also contributes to mental and physical health benefits for volunteers (Gianfredi et al., 2022). Moreover, the relationship between volunteering and social cohesion appears to be bidirectional, with cohesive communities promoting volunteerism and, conversely, volunteer activities strengthening

communal bonds (Willems et al., 2022). Additionally, motivations behind volunteerism are multifaceted, encompassing altruistic desires, social recognition, and a sense of collective responsibility (Paswan et al., 2022). These findings underscore the complex interplay between individual motivations and societal structures in shaping volunteer behaviours.

The question of whether volunteer work increases political involvement in adulthood was investigated by Daniel & Thomas (2006). However, once reaching maturity, people tend to have a set of political stances that are largely stable. A child's politics during the adolescent time are affected by the dynamics of the family, and politics frequently do not have a fixed nature. General engagement in extracurricular activities is crucial, especially youth volunteer associations that focus on community social services, representation, speaking in public forums, and creating a sense of community identity. Their participation in elections, campaigns, political parties, and community projects is highly influenced by their voluntary associations. Institutional relationships, moreover, influence how citizens participate. However, there is a decline in public involvement, particularly in voluntary organisations, which has an adverse impact on civic engagement.

During the nineteenth and twentieth century, American politics witnessed monopolised participation of men, and women's participation was marginal. Women who were unable to directly participate in city politics typically used voluntary associations as a route for their advantages and vitality. An increase in the number of women in political movements and organizations is a positive phenomenon (Gittel&Shtob, 1980). The motivation behind the organisation as well as the distribution of power and resources must be examined in order to evaluate the rising participation of women in political community organisations.

Petras (1997) made an effort to explain the concept of volunteerism in the economic sector based on American background. Clinton administration promoted the concept of volunteerism in the USA. The concept of volunteerism holds that individuals are better suited than the state to address social issues; that individual behaviour and characteristics, rather than property relations or the social positioning of the state, are to blame for social issues; and that private or individual 'citizen' initiatives can take the place of government programmes. Volunteerism functions as a social control tool and an ideology. Volunteerism transforms social issues into personal issues.

How and why people actively participate in social affairs, public life, and governance was the theme of the study of Zimmer,et al., (2016). It denotes preparation for politics, civic engagement in political associations, political campaigning, and attendance at political gatherings, voting, and other political activity participation. Depending on the period, location, and society, political volunteering takes on many forms, motivations, and goals. There are significant differences in the main areas of activity of volunteers and associations. Over time, there has been a significant improvement in the definition and practises of civic engagement and involvement. Political volunteering was a difficult way for women to get involved in politics in the past. Public participation was relatively limited in ancient Greece and Rome, especially among the affluent classes. The extent of civic participation and political involvement expanded under liberal democracy. The following features and chances for civic engagement, or citizen participation and political commitment, are included in this range: (1) Takes part in elections; (2) Runs for office; (3) Affiliates with or supports organisations that have political sway; and (4) Belongs to political parties. A social movement that participates in protests such as rallies and strikes using e-government tools such as signing petitions over the internet is also a sort of political participation. Civic engagement replicates how individuals make use of the opportunities offered by a political system.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Women's political participation has been widely discussed as a crucial component of achieving gender equality and empowering women in society. Goyal (2022) highlights the significance of grassroots activism in enhancing women's involvement in politics. The study shows that female politicians in India actively mobilize other women by recruiting them as grassroots party activists, which plays a critical role in shaping their political behaviour and encouraging their participation in democratic processes. Similarly, Haider and Nooruddin (2022) examine the gap between high female voter turnout and low political interest among women in India. Their research argues that patriarchal societal norms often suppress women's political expression, especially when surveys or political discussions take place in the presence of male family members, thus restricting women's voluntary political engagement. In addition, Parveen and Hussain (2022) focus on the role of Panchayat Raj Institutions in empowering women at the grassroots level in India. The authors emphasize the importance of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, which reserved one-third of local governance seats for women, significantly enhancing their representation and participation. Further, Sultana, Awal, and Karim (2022) investigate the perceptions of rural women in India, finding that while women view political participation as a pathway to empowerment, they often face challenges from traditional gender roles and domestic responsibilities.

Extending this discourse beyond India, Lee (2022) explores the Korean context, revealing that the increased visibility of female candidates in elections creates a virtuous circle that boosts political interest and engagement among women voters. These studies collectively demonstrate that women's political participation is deeply influenced by societal

norms, institutional support, grassroots activism, and the visibility of female political figures. In the context of women-led community organizations, Gupta and Rao (2022) highlight that digital interventions strengthen grassroots participation and foster socio-economic empowerment. Kudumbashree, Kerala's renowned poverty alleviation and women's empowerment initiative, has increasingly adopted digital tools for financial inclusion, entrepreneurship, and governance (Kumar & Nair, 2021). Research indicates that technology-driven volunteerism among Kudumbashree members has improved access to resources, enhanced leadership roles, and facilitated participatory decision-making at the community level (George, 2022).Active involvement in the economy allows women to gain financial independence and decision-making power. A study by Arivumani (2022) highlights a significant positive correlation between access to education, mentorship programs, and women's economic empowerment. The research emphasizes that women who undergo leadership training exhibit higher participation in leadership roles, underscoring the importance of policy frameworks and support systems to bridge the gender gap in economic and leadership domains.

However, challenges persist in integrating augmented volunteerism into community-based organizations like Kudumbashree. Studies by Joshi and Mehta (2021) emphasize that digital literacy and accessibility issues remain significant barriers for rural women engaging in volunteerism. Additionally, Kumar and Patel (2021) note that despite the potential of volunteerism, the lack of adequate institutional support and infrastructure can hinder its widespread adoption. The role of government policies and corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives in fostering volunteerism is critical in ensuring its sustainability (Banerjee & Sinha, 2022). Furthermore, augmented volunteerism must be aligned with the socio-cultural context of rural communities to be effective (Rao &Menon, 2022). In the case of Kudumbashree, leveraging platforms for volunteerism requires targeted training programs, localized technological solutions, and stronger policy integration to maximize its impact on inclusive development in Kannur district.

Women's participation in political processes, particularly within local governance structures like Panchayati Raj Institutions in India, has been transformative. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1993 mandated the reservation of one-third of seats for women in PRIs, significantly enhancing their representation and influence at the grassroots level. Despite this progress, challenges such as patriarchal norms and resource disparities persist, necessitating ongoing efforts to foster meaningful participation and empowerment of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (Parveen&Hussain, 2022). Engagement in community activities and social movements enables women to address issues directly affecting their lives, fostering a sense of agency and collective strength. Tamuli and Mishra (2022) argue that empowering women to participate in economic, political, social, and environmental spheres is essential for achieving gender equality and sustainable development in India. They emphasize that recognizing only men's contributions is insufficient; women's active involvement is crucial for holistic progress

Research Questions

RQ 1.How has the participation of Kudumbashree members in local body elections evolved between 2015 and 2020 in Kannur district?

RQ 2. What factors influence Kudumbashree members' willingness to take on leadership roles in political and social organizations?

RQ 3. To what extent do Kudumbashree members exercise free will in participating in political activities, including election rallies and campaigns?

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted mixed-methods research approach to examine the role of augmented volunteerism in enhancing community participation among Kudumbashree members in Kannur district. A descriptive research design is employed, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews to gather comprehensive insights. The study population includes Kudumbashree self-help group (SHG) members, CDS and ADS members.

A multi-stage sampling method is used, with stratified random sampling for selecting 700 Kudumbashree members and purposive sampling for 15-20 key informants. Data is collected through structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions, complemented by secondary data from government reports and policy documents. Quantitative data is analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics, while qualitative data undergoes thematic analysis.

Kudumbashree in Kannur District: An Overview

Kudumbashree, Kerala's State Poverty Eradication Mission, has implemented several key initiatives in Kannur district aimed at empowering women and fostering socio-economic development. One significant initiative is the formation of Neighbourhood Groups, which serve as the foundational units for collective action and microfinance activities. These NHGs have facilitated women's participation in various income-generating activities, including micro-enterprises and agricultural ventures, thereby enhancing their financial independence (Nair &Menon, 2017).

Table 1. Kudumbashree in Kannur district

No. CDS units	No. of ADS Units	No.of NHGs	Total Members
81	1535	20990	316724

Source: - Primary data

The Kudumbashree Mission in Kannur district comprises 81 Community Development Societies, which are apex-level bodies formed at the panchayat or municipal level. Each CDS oversees and coordinates the functioning of 1,535 Area Development Societies, which operate at the ward level and serve as a bridge between the grassroots and the panchayat. These ADSs supervise and support the activities of 20,990 Neighbourhood Groups the foundational units of Kudumbashree. Each NHG consists of 10–20 women who come together to engage in savings, internal lending, micro-enterprise, and social development activities. Altogether, these NHGs in Kannur district have mobilized a remarkable 316,724 women members, reflecting the mission's extensive reach and its critical role in enhancing women's participation in economic and social development. This massive grassroots network not only fosters financial inclusion and social solidarity but also acts as a vehicle for democratic participation and local self-governance, empowering women to lead change in their communities.

The impact of Kudumbashree's initiatives in Kannur has been substantial. Studies indicate that women's involvement in NHGs has led to improved decision-making power within households and increased participation in local governance. Additionally, the emphasis on micro-enterprises has contributed to poverty alleviation and economic growth in the district. The success of these programs underscores the effectiveness of Kudumbashree's approach in promoting sustainable development and women's empowerment in Kannur (Nair &Menon, 2017).

Table 2. Kudumbashree Member's Performance in 2015 and 2020 local body election (Kannur District)

CDSs under following assembly constituency	Total Kudumbashree members contested in Grama Panchayath	Total Won	Total Kudumbashree members contested in Block Panchayath	Total Won	Total Kudumbashree members contested in Dist. Panchayath	Total Won
Payyanur-2015 2020	68 81	36 46	6 6	5 5	0 0	0 0
Kalliassery-2015 2020	73 81	40 51	6 7	4 5	0 0	0 0
Taliparamba-2015 2020	150 166	52 63	9 12	5 6	2 3	0 0
Irikkoor-2015 2020	91 115	46 55	5 6	3 4	3 3	1 1
Kannur-2015 2020	40 46	27 31	8 10	5 6	0 0	0 0
Edakkad-2015 2020	66 75	33 38	7 8	4 5	1 2	1 2
Thalassery-2015 2020	80 93	44 52	3 6	4 6	0 0	0 0
Kuthuparamba-2015 2020	73 88	39 44	6 10	5 6	2 3	1 2
Panoor-2015 2020	46 56	26 31	7 9	4 6	0 0	0 0
Iritty-2015 2020	83 98	29 38	5 8	4 4	0 0	0 0
Peravoor-2015 2020	104 113	36 42	6 8	4 4	3 2	0 1

Source: - Primary data.

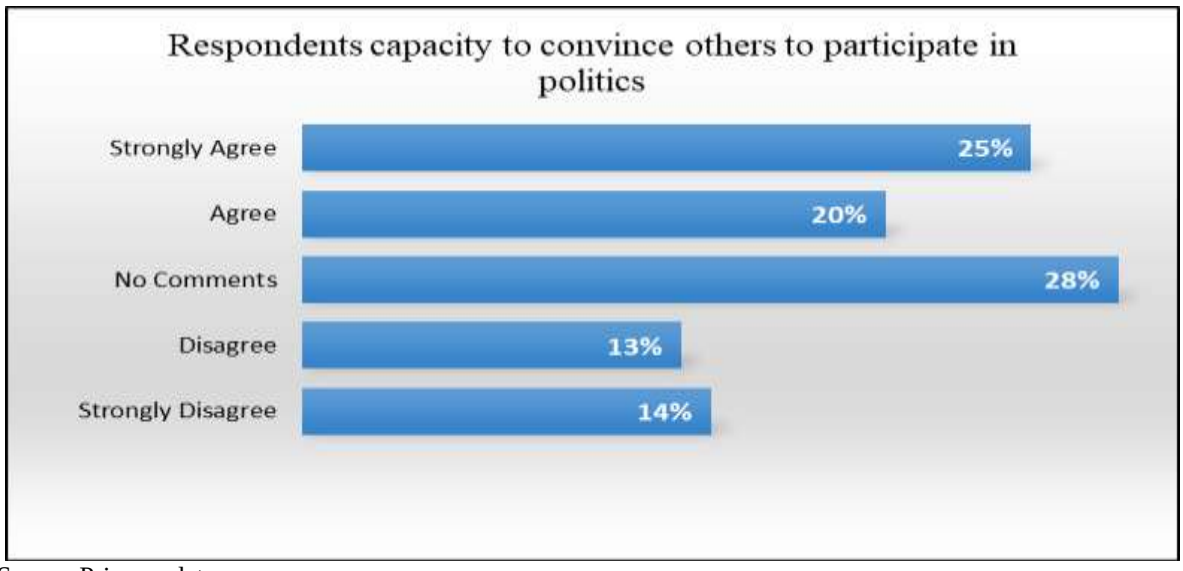
The table highlights the participation and success of Kudumbashree members in the 2015 and 2020 local body elections across various assembly constituencies in Kannur district at three levels: GramaPanchayath, Block Panchayath, and District Panchayath. Across all constituencies, the number of Kudumbashree members contesting elections increased in 2020 compared to 2015, indicating a growing interest in grassroots politics. The highest participation was observed in Taliparamba, with 166 candidates in GramaPanchayat elections in 2020, followed by Irikkoor (115) and Peravoor (113). While there was an overall increase in victories at the GramaPanchayat level, success at Block Panchayat and District Panchayat levels remained limited, with very few or no wins in several constituencies. For example, Irikkoor

showed some progress at the District Panchayat level with one win in 2020, whereas Payyanur, Kalliassery, Kannur, and Thalassery had no winners at this level in both election years.The data suggests that Kudumbashree members are increasingly participating in local governance, particularly at the GramaPanchayat level, where their success rate has improved. However, their representation and success at higher governance levels (Block and District Panchayats) remain significantly lower, indicating potential challenges such as political competition, resource limitations, and structural barriers. To enhance their success in higher-tier governance, there is a need for capacity-building programs, leadership training, and stronger institutional support to empower Kudumbashree members beyond the GramaPanchayat level.

Source: - Primary data

Figure 1. Kudumbashree member's reaction in accepting the leadership of any organisation

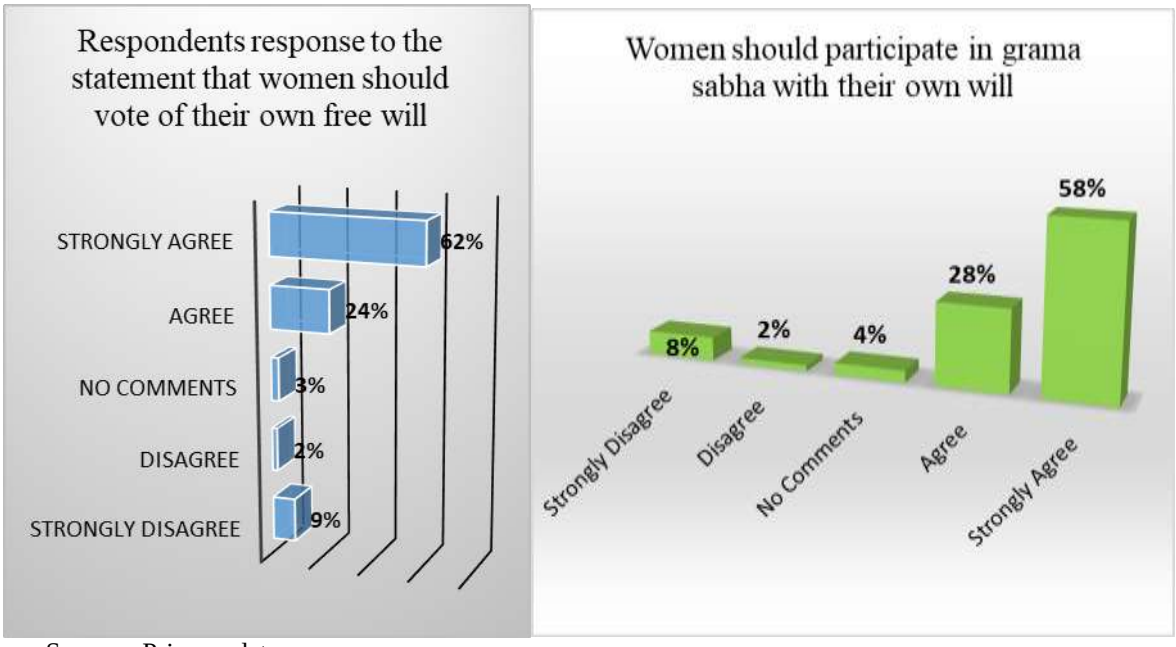
The bar graph represents the willingness of respondents to accept leadership roles in any organization, categorized into three responses: Yes, No, and Not Yet Decided. Among the respondents, 42% individuals (the highest proportion) expressed a willingness to take up leadership, indicating a positive inclination towards leadership roles. However, 33% respondents stated that they would not accept leadership positions, reflecting a significant section of individuals who might have reservations or lack confidence in assuming leadership roles. Additionally, 25% respondents remained undecided, suggesting a portion of the population is still contemplating their ability or interest in leadership.The data suggests that while a majority of respondents (42% out of 100) are open to leadership roles, a considerable number are either reluctant (33% respondents) or undecided (25% respondents). This indicates the need for leadership training, awareness programs, and motivational initiatives to encourage more individuals to take on leadership positions confidently. The undecided group also presents an opportunity for targeted interventions to build leadership capacity and foster confidence in community-driven initiatives.



Source-Primary data

Figure 2. Kudumbashree member's capacity to convince others to participate in Politics

The about chart presents respondents' views on their capacity to convince others to participate in politics. The data shows that 25% strongly agree and 20% agree, indicating that nearly 45% of respondents believe they can influence others to engage in politics. Meanwhile, 13% disagree and 14% strongly disagree, suggesting 27% of respondents feel they lack this capacity. Interestingly, 28% chose 'No Comments', indicating a significant proportion of neutrality or uncertainty on this issue.The findings suggest that while a considerable portion of respondents are confident in their ability to persuade others to join politics, a notable number remain hesitant or indifferent. The high percentage of neutral responses could reflect a lack of interest, political awareness, or hesitation in openly expressing opinions on political engagement. This highlights the further need for awareness campaigns and leadership training programs to empower individuals, particularly women in grassroots movements, to take on active political roles and encourage wider participation.



Source:- Primary data.

Figure 3. Kudumbashree member's observation on the exercise of free will in participation

The 3D bar chart represents respondents' opinions on whether women should vote of their own free will. A significant majority (62%) strongly agree, while 24% agree, showing that 86% of respondents believe women should have the autonomy to vote independently.

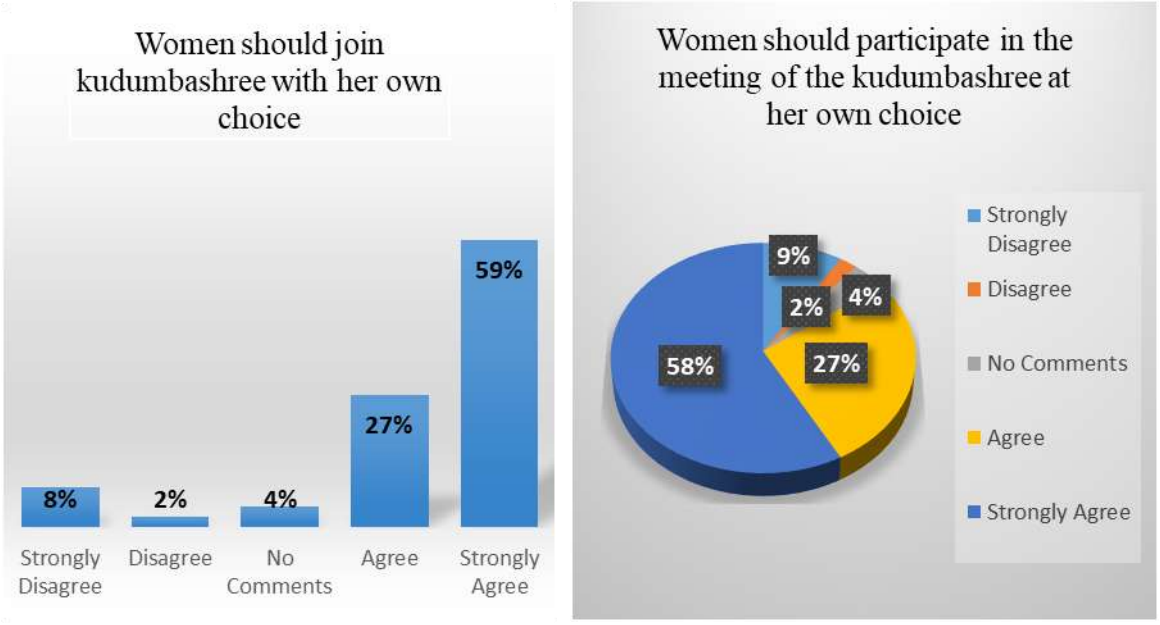
Meanwhile, a small percentage (9%) strongly disagree, and 2% disagree, indicating that only 11% oppose independent decision-making in voting. Additionally, 3% of respondents chose not to comment, possibly reflecting uncertainty or neutrality on the issue.The data indicates a strong societal endorsement of women's right to vote freely, emphasizing the importance of democratic participation without external influence.

The minimal opposition suggests that most individuals recognize and support women's political autonomy. This highlights the need for continued advocacy and awareness campaigns to reinforce women's empowerment in electoral processes, ensuring that they exercise their voting rights without coercion or external pressure.

The bar chart illustrates respondents' opinions on whether women should participate in GramaSabha meetings of their own will. A majority (58%) strongly agree, while 28% agree, indicating that 86% of respondents support women's independent participation in local governance meetings.

Meanwhile, 8% strongly disagree, 2% disagree, and 4% chose not to comment, reflecting a small proportion of opposition or neutrality on the matter.The data highlights a strong public endorsement of women's agency in community decision-making, with an overwhelming majority supporting their right to participate in GramaSabha meetings without coercion.

The minimal opposition suggests a positive shift in societal attitudes toward gender inclusivity in local governance. This underscores the importance of further awareness and policy initiatives to enhance women's active involvement in grassroots democratic processes, ensuring their voices are heard in community development.



Source: Primary data.

Figure 4. Kudumbashree members responds to join and participation in Units

The bar chart illustrates respondents' views on whether women should join Kudumbashree out of their own choice. A significant majority (59%) strongly agree, followed by 27% who agree, indicating that 86% of respondents believe that women should have the autonomy to decide their participation in Kudumbashree.

Meanwhile, a small percentage (8%) strongly disagree, and 2% disagree, showing that only 10% of respondents oppose the idea of voluntary participation. Additionally, 4% of respondents chose not to comment, suggesting possible neutrality or a lack of a strong opinion on the subject.The data suggests a strong societal endorsement of women's autonomy in joining Kudumbashree, reflecting a positive shift toward empowerment and self-determination in community-based initiatives. The minimal opposition indicates that most people recognize the importance of allowing women to make independent choices regarding their social and economic engagement.

This highlights the need for continued advocacy and awareness efforts to ensure that women are neither forced nor restricted from joining such initiatives, reinforcing Kudumbashree's role in inclusive development and gender empowerment.

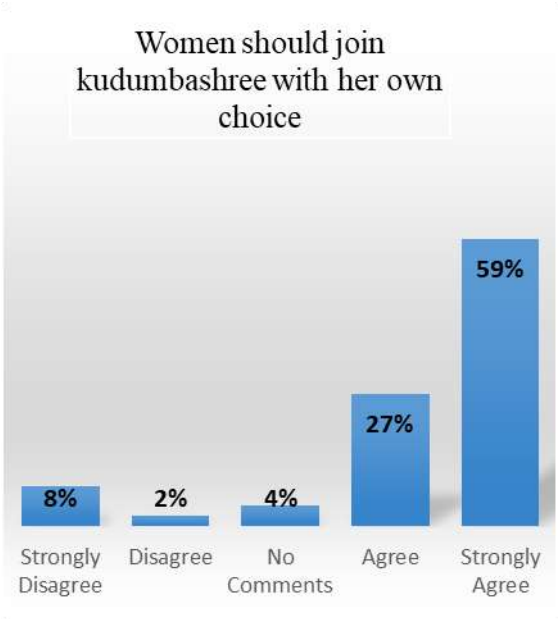
The pie chart represents respondents' opinions on whether women should participate in Kudumbashree meetings out of their own choice. A majority (58%) strongly agree, while 27% agree, indicating that 85% of respondents support voluntary participation in Kudumbashree meetings.

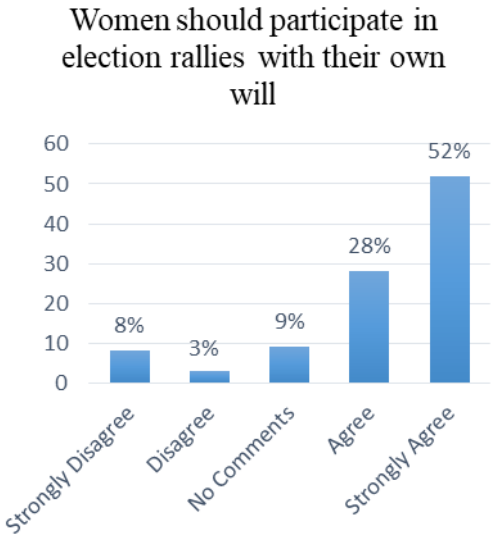
On the other hand, a small proportion (9%) strongly disagree, and 2% disagree, suggesting that only 11% oppose the idea of women making independent decisions regarding their participation. Additionally, 4% of respondents chose not to comment, possibly reflecting uncertainty or neutrality on the issue.

The data highlights a strong societal inclination towards women's autonomy in participating in Kudumbashree meetings, reinforcing the significance of self-determination in community engagement.

The minimal opposition suggests that most people recognize women's right to decide their involvement in such initiatives without external pressure.

This finding underscores the need for policies and awareness programs that continue to encourage women's independent decision-making in community development activities, ultimately fostering greater inclusivity and empowerment.





Source: Primary data

Figure 5. Freewill in the participation in election rallies and election campaigns

The bar chart illustrates respondents' opinions on whether women should join Kudumbashree out of their own choice. A majority (59%) strongly agree, while 27% agree, indicating that 86% of respondents support voluntary participation in Kudumbashree. A small proportion (8%) strongly disagree, while 2% disagree, suggesting that only 10% oppose the idea of independent decision-making in joining Kudumbashree. Additionally, 4% of respondents chose not to comment, indicating possible neutrality or lack of a firm stance on the matter.The data clearly shows strong public support for women's autonomy in joining Kudumbashree, reinforcing the importance of self-determination and empowerment in community-driven initiatives. The minimal opposition suggests that most people recognize Kudumbashree as a platform for women's social and economic upliftment, where forced participation should not be encouraged. This highlights the need for awareness campaigns to ensure that women's involvement remains a matter of personal choice rather than external influence.

The bar chart presents respondents' opinions on whether women should participate in election rallies out of their own will. A majority (52%) strongly agree, while 28% agree, indicating that 80% of respondents support voluntary participation in election rallies. On the other hand, a small proportion (8%) strongly disagree, and 3% disagree, suggesting that only 11% oppose the idea of women making independent decisions regarding political involvement. Additionally, 9% of respondents chose not to comment, possibly reflecting uncertainty or neutrality on the issue.

The data highlights strong support for women's autonomy in political participation, emphasizing the importance of freedom of choice in electoral activities. The minimal opposition suggests that most people acknowledge women's right to engage in political processes without coercion. This finding underscores the need for awareness programs and policy measures to encourage and safeguard women's independent political engagement, ensuring their active role in democratic processes.

CONCLUSION

Voluntary participation serves as a catalyst for women's empowerment by providing platforms for skill development, leadership, and decision-making. The study highlights the significant role of Kudumbashree in fostering women's political participation and leadership in Kannur district. The findings indicate a notable increase in the engagement of Kudumbashree members in local body elections between 2015 and 2020, reflecting their growing influence in grassroots governance. Their participation not only strengthened women's representation in decision-making bodies but also contributed to more inclusive and community-driven governance. Furthermore, the study reveals that while many Kudumbashree members are open to accepting leadership roles within organizations, their willingness is influenced by social, economic, and institutional factors. Their ability to mobilize and convince others to engage in political processes is evident, showcasing the program’s success in empowering women as active citizens. However, it also highlights concerns regarding the exercise of free will in political participation. While some members willingly join election rallies and campaigns, others feel pressured due to political affiliations or social expectations. Despite these challenges, Kudumbashree continues to serve as a transformative force in bridging the gender gap in political engagement, enhancing women's leadership capacities, and fostering democratic participation at the grassroots level. To further

strengthen this impact, targeted capacity-building programs and policies ensuring independent decision-making in political involvement are recommended. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how women-centric community organizations like Kudumbashree can shape democratic governance and social empowerment in India.

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