



KERALA'S GENDER PARADOX: HIGH FEMALE EDUCATION, LOW WORKFORCE PARTICIPATION WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO PALAKKAD DISTRICT

Economics

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ABSTRACT

Kerala, despite its outstanding social indicators and high female educational attainment, continues to experience a disproportionately low rate of female labour force participation. This study investigates the paradox of highly educated women in Kerala remaining outside the workforce, examining the socio-cultural, economic, and institutional barriers that hinder their employment. Employing a qualitative, exploratory research design, the study draws insights from interviews with 50 married, educated women aged 25 and above. Findings reveal that factors such as family responsibilities, unsupportive societal norms, limited access to suitable jobs, and inadequate workplace flexibility significantly affect women's labour market engagement. Even among those with prior employment, most left due to marriage, caregiving duties, or poor working conditions. The study also highlights a general indifference or resistance within families toward women's careers. Respondents suggested flexible work hours, childcare support, and better transport facilities as key enablers. The paper underscores the need for policy reforms and structural support to bridge the gap between education and employment, aiming to transform Kerala's gendered employment landscape.

KEYWORDS

INTRODUCTION

Kerala, often celebrated for its exemplary performance in social development indicators such as literacy, health, and education, presents a compelling paradox in the context of gender and employment. The state has achieved remarkable progress in female educational attainment—girls accounted for 51.4% of higher secondary students in 2020 and nearly 60% of enrolments in undergraduate and postgraduate programs. In the academic year 2021–2022, Kerala reported a Gender Parity Index (GPI) of 1.44, significantly exceeding the national average of 1.01. This figure reflects not only a narrowing of gender gaps in education but a reversal in favour of women—a rare phenomenon in the Indian context.

Despite Kerala's achievements, the state lags behind in women's participation in the labour market. Not only is the share of employed women relatively low, but the unemployment rate among women is notably higher. As per the CWS data for April–June 2024, labour force participation among individuals aged 15 and above stands at 70% for men, compared to just 29.9% for women. Data from the National Employment Service's Live Registry further underscores this gap—63.9% of registered job seekers are women, while only 36.1% are men. This presents a compelling case for examining the political and economic factors contributing to both the limited participation of women and their inadequate integration into the workforce.

The political leadership and religious institutions in Kerala, with their extensive cadre-based structures, have long shaped societal norms. However, they rarely promoted women's leadership within their own ranks, missing an opportunity to genuinely support the cause of gender equality. Organized gender movements in the state emerged relatively late in the 20th century, by which time Kerala was already experiencing a significant wave of economic migration to West Asia. This migration primarily involved working-age men, leaving women with the responsibility of managing households and caring for children and elderly family members.

As male outmigration grew, labour shortages emerged in sectors like agriculture and construction, leading to increased reliance on women's labour in these physically demanding fields. Despite repeated demands for fair wages and better working conditions, women continued to face hardships in these informal and labour-intensive occupations. Simultaneously, as a middle class began to take shape in Kerala, many women took up employment as domestic workers, often under precarious conditions.

As for Kerala's educated women, they had fewer opportunities to start with as a competent labour market needed to be included. Most of them were absorbed into Kerala's most organised job market at that time, teaching and the other vacancies in schools and colleges. Some others moved into the banking sector as foreign remittance demands emerged, resulting in more bank branches opening. The rest tried their luck in the PSC exams to get into government jobs.

Even though the service sector started dominating Kerala's economic

growth, the rules and regulations, such as in the Shops & Establishment Act and labour acts, among others did not allow women especially, but the sector as a whole, to scale up and generate more employment. Various studies across the regions in recent years could be verified in the Kerala context also—women's labour participation depends a lot on the overall job market growth and availability.

Job creation in Kerala has been very slow and poor compared to the number of graduates in the market, as evidenced by the employment exchange data. Neither has the manufacturing sector created job opportunities, nor have the existing provisions in the Factories and Labour Acts helped. Diversity in the job market has been missing in Kerala for decades. At the same time, the remittance also resulted in less demand for women to work to support their families. These relative improvements in family income have retained the patriarchal dominance in decision-making, with men continuing to hold primary authority.

All factors combined, it becomes clear why, despite high qualifications, it is difficult for women to secure employment as opposed to their male counterparts. High-income jobs are absent in Kerala to meet the demands of the aspiring workforce. The state's focus has been more on the upliftment of women from the socially backward setting, while the upward mobility of the women's workforce has been sidelined.

Overemphasis on the MSME and co-operative sectors largely deprived the upscaling of many sectors, thus reducing growth. Land conversion regulations are another factor that has restricted labour growth in Kerala. Given this context, due to the lack of high-income jobs coupled with conservative social norms, women in Kerala find it lucrative to migrate after completing professional courses or training in high-demand fields like nursing.

To better improve female workforce participation, Kerala needs to create a diverse pool of jobs and well-paying employment opportunities. This requires simultaneous efforts in all aspects ranging from improving investments, easing legal barriers that unintentionally disadvantage women, and strengthening support systems and care infrastructure among others.

Need For The Study

Kerala, often celebrated for its impressive social indicators, presents a paradoxical situation when it comes to gender and labour force participation. Despite having one of the highest female literacy and education rates in India, the state continues to witness alarmingly low levels of female participation in the workforce. According to the *Periodic Labour Force Survey* (PLFS, 2022-23), while female literacy in Kerala is over 90 percent, female labour force participation hovers below the national average. This mismatch between educational attainment and economic engagement has raised important questions about structural, cultural, and socio-economic barriers.

Several scholars have noted that Kerala's development model, heavily

oriented towards education and welfare, has not sufficiently translated into gender-equitable employment outcomes (Devika & Thampi, 2007; Eapen & Kodoth, 2003). While education empowers women socially, the labour market appears to remain structurally biased or inflexible to their needs. Issues such as rigid gender roles, family responsibilities, societal norms, and a preference for public sector jobs further constrain women's ability to participate in the labour market (NSSO, 2018; Kannan & Raveendran, 2012).

This paper seeks to explore this contradiction by examining the complex interplay between education, gender norms, and employment outcomes for women in Kerala. Through a qualitative analysis of lived experiences, the study aims to uncover the factors that constrain women's economic participation despite their academic achievements

General Objective

To explore the paradox of high educational attainment and low labour force participation among women in Kerala, with a focus on the socio-economic, cultural, and institutional factors that shape gendered employment patterns.

Specific Objectives

1. To examine the link between women's educational qualifications and their participation in the labour market.
2. To identify key barriers-social, cultural, economic, and institutional-that limit the workforce entry and retention of educated women.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative, descriptive, and exploratory research design to investigate the paradox of low labour force participation among highly educated women in Kerala, focusing on the socio-cultural, economic, and institutional factors influencing gendered employment patterns. Fieldwork will be conducted in selected areas of Kerala, including both urban and rural settings, with Palakkad chosen for its contrasting employment dynamics and high educational attainment. Using purposive sampling, the study will engage 50 respondents educated (graduate level and above), unemployed women from diverse socio-economic and marital backgrounds. Data will be collected through in-person and telephonic interviews using a semi-structured interview schedule covering topics such as education and employment history, labor market perceptions, barriers to employment, and gendered workplace experiences.

Findings

The study includes 50 respondents distributed across three age groups to capture a range of experiences related to women's labor force participation in Kerala. Majority of the respondents belongs to , aged 25–35 (20 respondents), represents young educated women at the early stages of their careers, often navigating job entry, family expectations, and work-life balance. The 35–45 age group (28 respondents) includes women who may be mid-career or attempting to re-enter the workforce after breaks, offering insights into challenges of continuity, re-skilling, and re-employment. A smaller group of respondents above 45 years (2 respondents) provides valuable retrospective perspectives on long-term trends and structural issues affecting educated women's participation in the labor market.

The educational profile of the respondents reflects a diverse range of higher qualifications. Among them, 12 hold general graduation degrees, 8 are B.Tech graduates, 26 have completed post-graduation, and 4 possess other forms of higher education or professional qualifications. It also highlights the employment barriers faced even by highly qualified women, revealing that advanced degrees or technical qualifications do not necessarily translate into better workforce integration in Kerala's labour market.

All the respondents in the study are married, which provides a focused lens on how marital status intersects with women's labour force participation in Kerala. This uniformity allows the study to specifically explore the impact of marital responsibilities, spousal support, childcare, and societal expectations on employment decisions. It also sheds light on the ways in which marriage influences women's career continuity, job-seeking behaviour, and access to opportunities, offering valuable insights into the structural and cultural barriers faced by educated married women in the workforce.

The employment status of the 50 respondents reveals varied experiences with the labor market. Of these, 12 women have **never**

been employed, highlighting the challenges faced in entering the workforce despite educational qualifications. **Twenty-two respondents were previously employed** but are currently out of the labor force, indicating interruptions due to factors such as marriage, childcare, or lack of suitable opportunities. The remaining **16 respondents are temporarily employed**, often in insecure or short-term roles, reflecting the prevalence of informal or unstable work among educated women. This distribution underscores the need to understand not just access to employment, but also continuity, quality, and stability in women's work lives.

The monthly family income distribution provides insight into their socio-economic backgrounds. **Eight respondents belong to households earning below ₹50,000 per month. Twenty respondents fall within the ₹50,000 to ₹1,00,000 income range**, representing middle-income families where women's employment may be shaped by both economic need and lifestyle aspirations. **Twelve respondents come from households earning above ₹1,00,000 per month**, where financial stability may reduce the economic necessity to work, but social factors and personal ambitions could still drive job-seeking behaviour.

The motivations behind pursuing higher education among the respondents reveal a strong influence of familial and social factors. **Thirty respondents cited family encouragement** as the primary driver, reflecting the supportive role families play in promoting women's education in Kerala. **Twelve respondents pursued higher education out of personal interest**, highlighting individual ambition and self-motivation. **Six respondents were influenced by societal expectations**, indicating the role of social norms and community pressures in shaping educational choices. **Two respondents reported other reasons**, such as peer influence or institutional encouragement. This distribution shows that while personal ambition matters, external support—particularly from family—plays a dominant role in women's pursuit of higher education.

The career aspirations of the respondents reflect a diverse range of preferences influenced by perceived job security, personal interests, and societal expectations. **Twenty-two respondents aspire to government service**, indicating a strong preference for stable, respected, and secure employment, which is often seen as ideal for women in Kerala. **Twelve respondents expressed interest in starting or managing a business**, reflecting entrepreneurial ambition and a desire for independence and flexibility. The remaining **sixteen respondents** indicated other career goals, including teaching, healthcare, or private sector jobs, showing openness to varied opportunities beyond traditional paths. This spread highlights both the appeal of conventional employment and the emerging interest in alternative and self-driven career options among educated women.

The responses regarding **family and societal support for women's education and career development** reveal significant constraints. While only **12 respondents reported receiving support**, a striking **38 respondents indicated a lack of encouragement or active resistance** from their families or broader society. This highlights a key barrier to women's labor force participation in Kerala: despite high levels of education, many women face discouragement or limitations when it comes to pursuing careers. These findings underscore the persistent influence of traditional gender roles and societal expectations that prioritize domestic responsibilities over professional ambitions for women.

When asked whether they are currently seeking employment, **20 respondents** stated that they are actively looking for a job, while **30 respondents** reported that they are not. This indicates that a **majority of the respondents (60%) are not presently engaged in job-seeking activities**, despite being educated. The reasons behind this could range from family responsibilities, discouragement from prior job search experiences, societal norms, or a lack of suitable opportunities. The 40% who are job-seeking reflect a segment that is motivated or in need of employment, suggesting both potential and unmet demand in the labor market for educated women in Kerala.

Among the 30 respondents who are not currently looking for a job, several reasons were identified, reflecting a combination of personal, familial, and structural barriers. The most commonly cited reason was family responsibilities, particularly childcare and eldercare duties, which often fall disproportionately on women. Lack of family support

or approval also emerged as a significant factor, where cultural or marital expectations discourage women from working outside the home. Some respondents mentioned discouragement due to previous job search failures, such as repeated rejections or lack of suitable openings matching their qualifications. Others expressed concerns about workplace safety, long commutes, or inflexible work hours, which make employment impractical. A few also felt that their household's financial stability reduced the immediate need to work. These responses collectively highlight the complex and intersecting barriers that limit the labor force participation of educated women in Kerala, even when they are otherwise qualified and capable.

38 respondents reported having prior work experience, while 12 have never been employed. This indicates that a significant majority of the participants have had some exposure to the labor market, suggesting a willingness and capacity to work. However, the fact that **12 educated women have never entered the workforce** highlights the presence of barriers to initial entry, which could include family restrictions, lack of suitable job opportunities, or societal expectations discouraging women from working. The responses from both groups provide valuable insights into different stages of women's labor force participation and the factors influencing their employment trajectories in Kerala.

Among the 38 respondents who had previously been employed, various reasons were cited for leaving their jobs, reflecting a mix of personal, social, and structural challenges. Many women pointed to family responsibilities such as marriage, childcare, or caregiving for elders, which made it difficult to balance domestic duties with professional demands. Others left due to unsupportive work environments, including gender bias, lack of flexibility, or poor working conditions. Some had to relocate after marriage and were unable to find suitable employment in the new location. A mismatch between their qualifications and the nature of their jobs also led a few to resign, while others cited low salaries, temporary contracts, and job insecurity particularly in the private or informal sectors as reasons for leaving. Additionally, a few women paused their careers to pursue higher education, with the hope of re-entering the workforce with better prospects.

The respondents reported facing multiple challenges in finding suitable employment, highlighting the complex barriers that hinder women's participation in the labor market in Kerala. A lack of suitable job opportunities (11 respondents) matching their educational qualifications was one of the most commonly cited issues, particularly among highly educated women. Many also mentioned limited access to flexible work arrangements, (13 respondents) which are essential for balancing family responsibilities. Some women lacked relevant work experience (38 respondents) or up-to-date skills, making them less competitive in a changing job market. Furthermore, discouragement from repeated rejections and the absence of effective job placement or career guidance services contributed to a sense of frustration and resignation. Together, these factors demonstrate how structural, cultural, and logistical issues intersect to limit women's access to meaningful employment in the state.

The respondents' experiences reveal varied family attitudes toward women's employment. **Only 12 respondents reported that their families are supportive**, encouraging them to seek or continue employment. The majority, **28 respondents**, described their families as **indifferent**, showing neither active support nor opposition, which often results in a lack of motivation or practical assistance in pursuing work. Meanwhile, **10 respondents** indicated that their families are **discouraging**, often prioritizing domestic roles over professional ambitions and viewing employment as unnecessary or inappropriate for women. This distribution underscores the significant role family attitudes play in shaping women's labor force participation, with indifference and discouragement continuing to act as silent yet powerful barriers.

The study identifies a range of barriers that prevent women from entering or remaining in the workforce. The most commonly reported obstacle was **family responsibilities**, cited by **24 respondents**, including childcare, eldercare, and household duties that limit their availability for employment. **Twelve respondents** pointed to a **lack of suitable job opportunities** that match their qualifications or provide desired working conditions. **Low wages**, mentioned by **five respondents**, were seen as a deterrent, especially when the cost of

commuting or balancing work with domestic duties outweighed the financial benefit. **Mobility issues**, reported by **four respondents**, included inadequate transport and safety concerns, particularly in rural or semi-urban areas. The remaining **five respondents** cited **other reasons**, such as health concerns, societal norms, or discouragement from past job search experiences. Together, these findings highlight the intersection of personal, economic, and structural challenges that hinder women's effective participation in Kerala's labor market.

The respondents offered several suggestions to improve women's participation in the workforce, reflecting their lived experiences and practical needs. The most frequently recommended measure was the provision of **flexible working hours**, suggested by **27 respondents**, emphasizing the need to balance professional responsibilities with family duties. **Twelve respondents** highlighted the importance of **child care facilities**, which would enable mothers, especially those with young children, to pursue employment without compromising caregiving roles. **Six respondents** recommended better **transport facilities**, particularly in areas where mobility and safety concerns limit access to workplaces. The remaining **five respondents** suggested **other measures**, such as awareness programs, career counseling, skill development opportunities, and inclusive workplace policies. These suggestions underscore the importance of structural support systems in enabling educated women to engage meaningfully in Kerala's labor market.

This study sheds light on the paradox of high educational attainment but low labor force participation among women in Kerala. Despite being well-qualified many with postgraduate and professional degrees the majority of respondents remain unemployed, primarily due to family responsibilities, unsupportive social norms, lack of suitable job opportunities, and structural barriers such as low wages, mobility issues, and the absence of flexible work arrangements. A significant number of women have prior work experience but were compelled to leave due to marriage, caregiving duties, or unfavorable work conditions. The findings clearly show that education alone does not guarantee employment for women; a supportive ecosystem—both at home and in the workplace—is essential. While a small proportion of families actively support women's careers, most are either indifferent or discouraging. Respondents expressed the need for flexible working hours, accessible childcare, safer transport, and targeted policy interventions to create a more enabling environment. Addressing these multifaceted barriers is crucial for enhancing women's workforce participation and ensuring that the state's educational progress translates into economic empowerment and gender equity.

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