

Research Article

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Empowering Women through Non-Governmental Organizations: Evidence from Wayanad District, Kerala

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Abstract

Keywords

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Women's empowerment is a multidimensional process involving greater access to resources, opportunities, rights, decision-making, and social, economic, and political participation. Despite Kerala's notable achievements in human development, women continue to face socio-economic inequalities and structural barriers, particularly in geographically and socially diverse regions such as Wayanad. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) play a significant role in addressing these challenges through grassroots interventions. This study examines the role and impact of selected NGOs in promoting women's empowerment in Wayanad district, Kerala, with particular reference to Neethi Vedhi, Wayanad Social Service Society (WSSS), Shreyas, RASTA Foundation, and MIRROR-Centre for Social Change. It evaluates their programmes and initiatives relating to livelihood promotion, skill development, awareness, rights, social inclusion, and community participation. The study also incorporates beneficiaries' perspectives to assess the effectiveness of these interventions and their contribution to enhancing women's socio-economic status, agency, and overall empowerment.

1. Introduction

Women's empowerment has emerged as a central concern of human rights and development discourse, particularly since the latter half of the twentieth century. Historically, deeply rooted patriarchal structures, gender norms, and unequal access to resources have restricted women's social, economic, political, and cultural participation. International initiatives, beginning with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and subsequently strengthened through global women's movements, United Nations conferences, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Platform for Action, and the Sustainable Development Goals, have progressively placed gender equality at the centre of the global development agenda. Women's empowerment today extends beyond formal equality and encompasses economic independence, access to education and healthcare, control over productive resources, freedom from violence and discrimination, participation in decision-making, political representation, and the capacity to exercise agency over one's life. Within this broader framework, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have emerged as important agents of social transformation. Their grassroots presence, flexibility, community-based interventions, advocacy, capacity-building initiatives, livelihood programmes, legal assistance, and ability to reach socially and economically marginalized groups enable them to complement public institutions and translate broader development goals into locally relevant interventions.

In India, women's empowerment remains a complex and continuing development challenge despite substantial constitutional, legislative, educational, and socio-economic progress. Women constitute nearly half of the country's population and have made significant contributions across economic, social, scientific, administrative, and political spheres. Nevertheless, gender disparities persist in labour-force participation, access to productive assets, unpaid care responsibilities, wages, occupational

opportunities, safety, political representation, and decision-making. The persistence of these inequalities demonstrates that improvements in education and legal rights do not automatically translate into substantive empowerment. NGOs have therefore become important partners in addressing the gap between formal rights and women lived experiences. Through interventions in education, healthcare, skill development, livelihood generation, entrepreneurship, financial inclusion, legal literacy, gender awareness, protection from violence, and community mobilization, NGOs can strengthen women's capabilities and collective agency. Kerala presents an important context in this regard. Although the state has achieved relatively favourable outcomes in female literacy, health, life expectancy, and social development, women continue to encounter challenges relating to employment, economic independence, unpaid care work, gender-based violence, leadership, and representation in decision-making. Consequently, women's empowerment in Kerala needs to be assessed not merely through conventional human-development indicators but also through women's actual control over resources, choices, opportunities, and participation.

Wayanad provides a particularly significant setting for examining these issues because of its geographical characteristics, substantial Scheduled Tribe population, rural dependence, livelihood vulnerabilities, and socio-economic diversity. Women belonging to tribal, rural, economically disadvantaged, and other marginalized communities may experience overlapping disadvantages associated with gender, income, geographical isolation, employment insecurity, limited access to services, and social exclusion. These conditions make locally grounded and community-oriented interventions especially important. Several NGOs operating in Wayanad have sought to address these challenges through livelihood promotion, skill development, awareness programmes, legal assistance, social mobilization, healthcare interventions, entrepreneurship support, community development, and initiatives aimed at strengthening women's rights and participation.

Against this background, the present study examines the role and impact of selected Non-Governmental Organizations in promoting women's empowerment in Wayanad district, Kerala, with particular reference to Neethi Vedhi, Wayanad Social Service Society (WSSS), Shreyas, RASTA Foundation, and MIRROR–Centre for Social Change. The study seeks to understand the nature and scope of their interventions and assess their contribution to the social and economic empowerment of women, while also incorporating beneficiaries' perceptions regarding the accessibility, effectiveness, and outcomes of these programmes.

2. Review of Literature

The relationship between Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and women's empowerment has received considerable attention in development literature, particularly in relation to economic independence, social participation, gender equality, access to resources, and decision-making. Existing studies demonstrate that NGOs can contribute to women's empowerment not only through service delivery but also through capacity building, collective action, rights awareness, and the strengthening of women's agency.

Kilby (2010), in *NGOs in India: The Challenges of Women's Empowerment and Accountability*, examines the role of NGOs in promoting women's empowerment in India, with particular attention to their engagement with women and Self-Help Groups (SHGs). The study emphasizes that empowerment should extend beyond the provision of material resources and livelihood opportunities to include women's agency, participation, and influence over decisions affecting their lives. Kilby further highlights the importance of downward accountability, arguing that NGOs must remain accountable to the women and communities they seek to empower. The work also draws attention to the challenges faced by smaller grassroots organizations in the context of changing development priorities and funding structures.

Handy and Kassam (2006), in *Practice What You Preach? The Role of Rural NGOs in Women's Empowerment*, analyse the contribution of rural NGOs to women's empowerment and explore whether the principles of empowerment promoted by NGOs are reflected within their own organizational practices. The study highlights the importance of economic and social empowerment, autonomy, political awareness, and women's participation in decision-making. It also draws attention to differences between the empowerment experienced by NGO employees and that of beneficiary women. The authors identify social and spiritual capital as factors that can strengthen the empowerment process, thereby suggesting that empowerment involves dimensions beyond improvements in income alone.

Viswanath (1991), in *NGOs and Women's Development in Rural South India: A Comparative Analysis*, examines the contribution of NGOs to women's development in rural South India. The study demonstrates the potential of NGOs to respond to locally specific needs through targeted development interventions. It particularly emphasizes their contribution to increasing women's participation, improving access to development opportunities, and strengthening their involvement in household and community decision-making. The study establishes the importance of grassroots organizations in addressing the specific disadvantages experienced by rural women.

Cardoza and N. (2023), in their study on women-oriented NGO interventions and societal change, examine how NGOs contribute to women's empowerment and gender equality through targeted interventions. Their analysis highlights the role of NGOs in addressing gender-based inequalities and creating opportunities for women through vocational training, healthcare services, awareness programmes, and community-development initiatives. The study suggests that NGO interventions can contribute not only to individual-level empowerment but also to wider social change by challenging discriminatory

practices and strengthening women's position within communities.

Desta (2012), in *The Role of Local NGOs for Women Economic Empowerment*, focuses specifically on the economic dimensions of empowerment. The study identifies access to credit, productive resources, business training, market information, education, and livelihood opportunities as important channels through which NGOs can improve women's economic position. Increased access to income-generating opportunities can strengthen women's control over resources and enhance their participation in household economic decisions. The study therefore establishes an important connection between economic independence, control over productive resources, and women's overall decision-making capacity.

Narumugai and Kumar (2017), in *Role of NGOs Towards Women Empowerment*, provide a broader assessment of the contribution of NGOs to women's development. They identify education, vocational and skill training, entrepreneurship development, legal assistance, awareness programmes, and community participation as important areas of NGO intervention. The study emphasizes that NGOs can contribute simultaneously to the economic, social, and political dimensions of empowerment, particularly among rural and disadvantaged women. The authors also underline the relevance of NGO interventions in enabling women to participate more effectively in entrepreneurship and sustainable development.

Baviskar (2001), in his discussion of NGOs and civil society in India, places NGOs within the broader evolution of civil society and development interventions. Rather than viewing NGOs exclusively as service-delivery institutions, the study examines their relationship with grassroots mobilization and social movements. Importantly, Baviskar raises concerns regarding the increasing "NGO-ization" of social action, whereby collective movements may become professionalized, institutionalized, and dependent on project-oriented approaches.

Such a transformation can potentially shift attention from structural inequalities and political mobilization towards narrowly defined service-delivery objectives. This perspective provides an important critical dimension to the literature by suggesting that the contribution of NGOs should be assessed not merely in terms of programmes implemented but also in terms of their ability to facilitate meaningful participation and structural change.

Beniwal (2013), in *Gender Discrimination and Empowerment of Women in India*, examines women's empowerment within the wider context of persistent gender discrimination and patriarchal social structures. The study identifies social, economic, cultural, and political inequalities as interconnected barriers to women's advancement. It argues that genuine empowerment requires improvements in women's economic opportunities, social status, political participation, education, and decision-making power. The study is particularly relevant in demonstrating that programmes aimed at women's development need to address the structural foundations of gender inequality rather than focusing exclusively on welfare-oriented interventions.

Samiul Islam and Thasnim (2011), in *The NGOs and Women's Empowerment*, conceptualize empowerment as a multidimensional process encompassing social, economic, and political dimensions. Their study places particular emphasis on economic participation and social transformation as essential components of sustainable empowerment. The findings indicate that association with NGOs can contribute to changes in women's involvement in income-generating and entrepreneurial activities, thereby improving their economic participation and potentially strengthening their position within households and communities. The study reinforces the argument that economic empowerment can act as an important pathway towards broader social empowerment.

Handy, Kassam, Feeney, and Ranade (2006), in *Grassroots NGOs by Women for Women: The Driving Force of Development in India*, examine

women-led grassroots organizations in India from organizational and feminist perspectives. The work highlights the distinctive contribution of organizations created and managed by women in addressing gender-specific development concerns. It explores their organizational structures, entrepreneurship initiatives, collective mobilization, microfinance activities, and engagement with women's social and political empowerment. The authors demonstrate that women-led grassroots organizations can create spaces for leadership, collective identity, entrepreneurship, and participation, thereby allowing women to function not simply as beneficiaries of development programmes but as active agents of social transformation.

The existing literature highlights the significant role of NGOs in promoting women's empowerment through livelihood opportunities, financial inclusion, skill development, education, healthcare, legal awareness, entrepreneurship, and social participation. However, their effectiveness depends on factors such as accountability, beneficiary participation, sustainability, and their capacity to address structural gender inequalities. Despite extensive research on NGOs and women's empowerment, limited empirical attention has been given to the experiences of women beneficiaries in Wayanad, particularly within its rural, tribal, and socio-economically diverse context. The present study addresses this gap by examining selected NGOs in Wayanad and assessing their interventions and perceived impact on women's economic independence, decision-making, social participation, and overall empowerment.

3. Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the aims, objectives, and major programmes of selected NGOs engaged in women's empowerment in Wayanad district.
2. To assess the role of NGOs in promoting the social, economic, and political empowerment of women in Wayanad.
3. To analyse the impact of NGO interventions on women's economic independence, decision-

making, awareness, skills, and social participation.

4. To evaluate the effectiveness of programmes and initiatives implemented by selected NGOs for women's empowerment in Wayanad district.

4. Methodology

The study employs a descriptive and analytical research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to assess the role and impact of selected Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in promoting women's empowerment in Wayanad district. The analysis is based on both primary and secondary data. Primary data are collected from women beneficiaries of selected NGOs—Neethi Vedhi, Wayanad Social Service Society (WSSS), Shreyas, RASTA Foundation, and MIRROR—Centre for Social Change—through a structured questionnaire, supplemented by relevant interactions with beneficiaries and organizational representatives. The study examines major dimensions of empowerment, including livelihood opportunities, economic independence, skill development, financial access, awareness of rights, decision-making, and social participation. Secondary data are obtained from NGO reports and publications, government documents and statistical sources, books, research articles, journals, and other credible online sources. The collected information is systematically analysed using appropriate descriptive and analytical methods to evaluate the nature, effectiveness, and perceived outcomes of NGO interventions in women's empowerment.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Women's Empowerment and NGO Interventions in Wayanad

Wayanad presents a distinctive socio-economic setting for examining women's empowerment because of its predominantly rural character, substantial tribal population, dependence on agriculture and allied activities, and geographical

constraints. Although Kerala has achieved significant progress in literacy, health, and social development, women in Wayanad, particularly those belonging to tribal, rural, and economically disadvantaged communities, continue to experience challenges related to livelihood security, economic independence, healthcare access, legal awareness, and participation in decision-making. Women's empowerment in the district therefore requires a multidimensional approach combining economic opportunities with social, legal, educational, health, and political interventions.

The employment structure of Wayanad further demonstrates the importance of economic empowerment. Women constitute a significant share of agricultural and marginal workers but remain comparatively less represented among main cultivators and other categories of regular employment. Their relatively greater presence in marginal employment suggests continued dependence on seasonal, casual, and insecure livelihood opportunities. In this context, NGOs can play an important complementary role by promoting Self-Help Groups (SHGs), entrepreneurship, skill development, microfinance, financial literacy, legal awareness, healthcare, leadership, and community participation.

The present study examines five NGOs operating in Wayanad—Wayanad Social Service Society (WSSS), SHREYAS, Rural Agency for Social and Technological Advancement (RASTA), Neethi Vedhi, and MIRROR—Centre for Social Change. While WSSS, SHREYAS, and RASTA have significant livelihood and community-development components, Neethi Vedhi primarily emphasizes legal empowerment and access to justice, and MIRROR combines capacity building, skill development, legal awareness, and political education.

5.2 Wayanad Social Service Society (WSSS)

Wayanad Social Service Society (WSSS) undertakes various programmes aimed at improving the socio-economic conditions of marginalized communities. Its interventions for women include Self-Help Groups, microcredit and savings, income-generating activities, microenterprise development, human-resource development, family-development programmes, and initiatives targeting tribal and minority communities. Through SHGs, women obtain opportunities for savings, credit access, bookkeeping, leadership development, and collective decision-making. Programmes relating to financial literacy, digital awareness, health, legal rights, and family welfare further broaden the scope of its empowerment initiatives.

Table 1: Beneficiary Opinion on the Work of WSSS for Women's Empowerment

Sl. No.	Opinion of Beneficiaries	Number	Percentage
1	Excellent	17	59%
2	Good	9	31%
3	Satisfied	3	10%
4	Not Satisfied	0	0%
5	Total	30	100%

Source: Primary Survey.

Table 1 indicates a highly favourable assessment of WSSS among the surveyed beneficiaries. According to the reported data, 59 per cent rated the organization's contribution to women's empowerment as excellent, 31 per cent considered it good, and 10 per cent were satisfied. No

respondent was reported as dissatisfied. The predominance of positive responses suggests that beneficiaries generally perceive WSSS programmes as useful in improving their socio-economic conditions. Its combination of livelihood support, financial services, SHGs,

capacity building, and family-development initiatives appears to contribute to women's economic independence and social participation.

5.3 SHREYAS – Organization for Sustainable Development and Justice

SHREYAS is an important development organization operating in Wayanad, with particular attention to women, tribal communities, rural households, and disadvantaged groups. Its major interventions include SHG formation,

community-based organizations, entrepreneurship-development programmes, family-development initiatives, gender and development programmes, community health, education, and tribal development. Entrepreneurship and skill-development activities are particularly relevant to women because they create opportunities for self-employment and income generation. SHGs and community organizations also facilitate collective participation, savings, leadership, and decision-making.

Table 2: Beneficiary Opinion on the Work of SHREYAS for Women's Empowerment

Sl. No.	Opinion of Beneficiaries	Number	Percentage
1	Excellent	15	50%
2	Good	8	27%
3	Satisfied	5	17%
4	Not Satisfied	2	6%
5	Total	30	100%

Source: Primary Survey.

As shown in Table 2, 50 per cent of the beneficiaries rated the work of SHREYAS as excellent, while 27 per cent rated it as good and 17 per cent as satisfactory. Only 6 per cent expressed dissatisfaction. Thus, the findings reveal an overall positive perception of SHREYAS among beneficiaries. At the same time, the presence of a small proportion of dissatisfied respondents suggests scope for improving programme accessibility, resource allocation, beneficiary engagement, or service delivery.

5.4 Rural Agency for Social and Technological Advancement (RASTA)

RASTA adopts a community-centred approach to the development of women, tribal communities,

small farmers, landless labourers, and other marginalized groups. Its women-oriented interventions include vocational training, livelihood promotion, SHGs, financial support, health and nutrition awareness, education, leadership development, and community participation. Training in activities such as tailoring, agriculture, food processing, crafts, and computer-related skills can improve women's employability and opportunities for self-employment. Its SHG initiatives also facilitate savings, access to credit, collective organization, and livelihood development.

Table 3: Beneficiary Opinion on the Work of RASTA for Women's Empowerment

Sl. No.	Opinion of Beneficiaries	Number	Percentage
1	Excellent	21	70%
2	Good	5	16.6%
3	Satisfied	3	10%
4	Not Satisfied	1	3.4%
5	Total	30	100%

Source: Primary Survey.

Table 3 demonstrates a particularly favourable perception of RASTA. Seventy per cent of respondents rated its contribution as excellent, 16.6 per cent as good, and 10 per cent as satisfactory, while only 3.4 per cent reported dissatisfaction. Among the three NGOs for which beneficiary satisfaction data are available, RASTA records the highest reported proportion of “excellent” responses. The findings suggest that its combination of livelihood, skill-development, financial, educational, and social interventions is positively perceived by the surveyed beneficiaries.

5.4 Economic Empowerment: Comparative Reach of NGOs

Economic empowerment constitutes one of the most important areas of NGO intervention in Wayanad. SHGs, microcredit, entrepreneurship, skill training, savings programmes, and income-generating activities seek to strengthen women’s financial independence and livelihood security. The reported number of economic beneficiaries of RASTA, SHREYAS, and WSSS is presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Comparative Analysis of NGOs by Number of Economic Beneficiaries

Sl. No.	NGO	Number of Economic Beneficiaries
1	RASTA	10,300
2	SHREYAS	51,200
3	WSSS	39,500

Source: Data reported by the selected NGOs.

Table 4 shows considerable variation in the reported reach of economic-empowerment programmes. SHREYAS records the largest number of economic beneficiaries at 51,200, followed by WSSS with 39,500 and RASTA with 10,300. Taken together, the reported figures indicate **101,000 economic beneficiaries** across the three organizations. SHREYAS accounts for slightly more than half of this reported total, demonstrating the comparatively wider reach of its economic programmes.

The results indicate that livelihood and economic interventions constitute a major component of NGO-led women’s empowerment in Wayanad. SHGs, microfinance, entrepreneurship-development programmes, vocational training, savings schemes, and other livelihood interventions can strengthen women’s access to financial resources and potentially reduce economic dependence. However, the number of beneficiaries represents programme reach rather than the intensity or sustainability of empowerment. A larger beneficiary base does not necessarily imply a proportionately greater impact

on income, employment security, asset ownership, or decision-making power.

5.5 Social Development and Legal Awareness

Women’s empowerment cannot be restricted to economic independence alone. Awareness of legal and social rights, access to justice, confidence in public participation, and the ability to respond to discrimination and violence are equally important. The selected NGOs address these dimensions through legal-awareness campaigns, counselling, community mobilization, political education, capacity building, and rights-based interventions.

Neethi Vedhi has a particularly significant role in legal empowerment. Its activities focus on Adivasis, women, children, and other marginalized groups and include legal-awareness programmes, legal assistance, counselling, and support for women affected by domestic violence, abuse, and discrimination. Its interventions seek to improve awareness concerning domestic violence, dowry-related abuse, workplace sexual

harassment, inheritance rights, child protection, and other legal safeguards.

MIRROR–Centre for Social Change also contributes to social and political empowerment through capacity building, skill development, legal awareness, political education, and

community participation. Its activities relating to Panchayati Raj Institutions, constitutional awareness, Jagratha Samithis, and political education are particularly relevant for strengthening women's participation in local governance and public decision-making.

Table 5: Comparative Analysis of NGOs by Beneficiaries of Social Development and Legal Awareness Programmes

Sl. No.	NGO	Total Number of Beneficiaries
1	MIRROR–Centre	6,000
2	Neethi Vedhi	12,000
3	RASTA	8,000
4	SHREYAS	25,000
5	WSSS	11,500

Source: Data reported by the selected NGOs.

Table 5 indicates that SHREYAS has the highest reported beneficiary coverage in social-development and legal-awareness activities, with 25,000 beneficiaries. It is followed by Neethi Vedhi with 12,000, WSSS with 11,500, RASTA with 8,000, and MIRROR–Centre with 6,000. Collectively, the five NGOs report **62,500 beneficiaries** under social-development and legal-awareness activities.

The figures reveal that women's empowerment interventions in Wayanad extend considerably beyond livelihood promotion. Neethi Vedhi's rights-based and legal orientation is particularly significant because legal awareness and access to justice can strengthen women's ability to challenge discrimination and violence. Similarly, MIRROR's focus on political education, capacity building, and local-governance awareness contributes to dimensions of empowerment that may not be adequately captured through income or employment indicators.

The empirical findings indicate that the selected NGOs make significant and complementary contributions to women's empowerment in Wayanad through economic, social, legal, and political interventions. WSSS, SHREYAS, and RASTA primarily promote economic empowerment through SHGs, microfinance, livelihood programmes, entrepreneurship, and

skill development, while Neethi Vedhi focuses on legal awareness, counselling, rights protection, and access to justice, and MIRROR–Centre emphasizes capacity building, political education, skill development, and community participation. Beneficiary perceptions are largely favourable, with RASTA recording the highest reported excellent rating of 70 per cent, while SHREYAS has the widest reported beneficiary coverage in economic empowerment as well as social development and legal awareness. These interventions are particularly important for tribal, rural, and socio-economically marginalized women by improving access to resources, information, livelihood opportunities, collective organizations, and decision-making processes. However, challenges persist in ensuring sustainable employment, healthcare access, digital inclusion, legal and political awareness, adequate resources, and wider geographical coverage. Overall, the findings demonstrate that women's empowerment requires a multidimensional approach extending beyond income generation towards greater agency, autonomy, rights awareness, social participation, and decision-making. Stronger convergence among NGOs, local governments, Kudumbashree, government agencies, and community institutions could further enhance the sustainability and effectiveness of women's empowerment initiatives in Wayanad.

5.6 Conclusion

The study concludes that women's empowerment is a multidimensional process encompassing economic independence, social participation, legal awareness, political engagement, self-confidence, and the ability to exercise agency and make meaningful decisions. In Wayanad, where rural conditions, tribal concentration, geographical constraints, and socio-economic vulnerabilities create distinctive challenges for women, NGOs play an important role in complementing governmental efforts towards gender equality and inclusive development. The selected NGOs have contributed to women's empowerment through livelihood promotion, SHGs, microfinance, skill development, healthcare awareness, legal assistance, capacity building, and political and community participation, thereby strengthening women's self-reliance, awareness, and social visibility. However, inadequate resources, limited outreach in remote areas, coordination gaps, and concerns regarding sustainability and accountability continue to constrain their effectiveness. Greater participation of women in the leadership and management of NGOs, along with systematic mechanisms for assessing empowerment outcomes, could make interventions more responsive to women's actual needs. Stronger collaboration among NGOs, government institutions, local self-governments, Kudumbashree, and local communities is therefore essential to ensure that women, particularly those from tribal and marginalized communities, progress from being beneficiaries of development programmes to active agents and leaders of sustainable and inclusive development in Wayanad.

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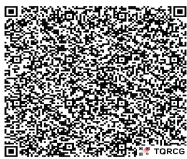
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