

Redefining Power Dynamics: A Holistic Analysis of Micro-Business Impact on Women's Autonomy

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Abstract

This study presents a systematic analysis to assess the impact of micro-enterprises on women's empowerment. A comprehensive analysis of the literature on women's empowerment, self-help organisations, and microenterprises has been conducted. The study employed empirical methods and a cross-sectional design. A self-administered, pre-tested questionnaire was used to collect primary data. The researchers employed a multi-stage sampling methodology to collect the requisite data from participants with a minimum of three years of experience in micro-enterprise activities. The proposed conceptual framework for assessing women's empowerment incorporates six commonly employed variables in this field of study. Through EFA and CFA, all of these variables have been identified and validated. A path analysis was performed to evaluate the importance of the hypothesized relationship between the variables under consideration. The analysis revealed that antecedents directly contribute to a growth in business performance, which in turn leads to a rise in the empowerment of members in group micro-enterprises. Evidence shows that microenterprises serve as potent catalysts for women's empowerment, particularly when supported by financial resources, skills development, and substantial social networks. Their impact extends beyond financial gain to encompass community engagement, family decision-making, and social welfare and development.

Keywords: Women empowerment, Micro-enterprises, Enterprise performance, Kudumbashree Mission, Sustainable development.

Introduction

Women's empowerment is increasingly seen as essential to sustained economic development of a nation (Ruslan et al., 2024). India's diversity of languages, cultures, and religions includes women from many different backgrounds such as various castes, creeds, and other disadvantaged groups (Roy et al., 2019); (Chakraborty & Borman, 2012). Women are disadvantaged in all areas, leading to limited access to healthcare, education, sanitation, autonomy, and decision-making opportunities, hindering their empowerment and overall well-being (Shankar et al., 2019). Traditionally, women have been limited to conventional domestic duties, primarily focused on childcare, culinary tasks, and other household routines (Pradeep & Rakshitha Rai, 2016). It is more difficult for women to raise capital to launch their own businesses and advance in their careers (Susmita et al., 2018); (Chakraborty & Borman, 2012). Women hailing from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are acquiring knowledge and skills pertaining to financial autonomy as a means to attain empowerment (Moon, 2011). The practice of women's empowerment involves addressing all power structures and sources (Nayak & Panigrahi, 2020). Individually and collectively, this process should promote women's empowerment effectively. Poor women can surmount obstacles by banding together and leveraging their collective strength (Borkakoty & Bhattacharjya, 2017); (Ghose et al., 2017).

Women are a fundamental component of human society, and empowering them will expedite progress (Momsen, 2008). A development strategy that neglects the importance of empowering women cannot achieve national prosperity; prioritising women's capabilities and ensuring comprehensive empowerment is the key to long-term sustainable growth of the nation (Mathur & Agarwal, 2017). The advancement of female entrepreneurship has emerged as a crucial component of economic expansion. Given this, it was stressed that specific initiatives targeting women's entrepreneurship, such as exclusive self-employment and other developmental programs, should be developed. Implementing women's development initiatives has the potential to foster greater inclusivity in economic development among the disadvantaged population at the lower end of the socioeconomic hierarchy (Chatterjee et al., 2018). Women achieve gender equality and autonomy, and make significant contributions to the development of their children, when they possess economic empowerment, which is demonstrated through their direct control over income and capital (Kabeer, 1999b), and aids growth of income of their country (Sohail, 2014).

Background Of The Study

The development of a nation relies not only on the advancement of infrastructure and technology, but also on the enhancement of the quality of life for all citizens, irrespective of gender (Sachs, 2012). Sustainable development places emphasis on the welfare of the whole population and the environment, with the aim of ensuring a superior quality of life (Pearce et al., 2013). Women in developing nations still encounter prejudice when it comes to their ability to obtain education, secure a job, acquire economic resources, and engage in political activities (P. R. Sharma, 2008); (A. M. Sultana & Zulkefli, 2012). Therefore, gender equality, participation in economic activities, empowerment, and the provision of rural financial services are considered indispensable for rural development (Mayoux, 2001). Poverty, inequality, and economic imbalances can only be reduced by programs that prioritize the upliftment of marginalized sectors of the economy (Narayan-Parker, 2002); (Susmita et al., 2018). Empowering women would accelerate the objectives of inclusive, equitable, and sustainable long-term development of an economy (Huis et al., 2017); (Sachs, 2012); (Commission, 2008).

Microfinance is a concept that empowers individuals with limited financial resources to access and leverage economic possibilities, hence fostering economic growth (Swain & Wallentin, 2009a). Microfinance has played a considerable role in rural development (Atteraya et al., 2016); (Swain & Wallentin, 2009b), women empowerment, and wealth creation in India by providing deprived and low-income families with small savings, credit, insurance, and other financial services (O'Gorman, 2013). Thus, microfinance serves as a tool for empowering the disadvantaged (Swain & Wallentin, 2009a), (Weber & Ahmad, 2014) and assists in the process of economic growth with a vital instrument. In rural areas, the paradigm of microfinance and self-employment has evolved significantly over the past two decades. It is not working through donations or subsidies. It is

essentially a rotational investment aimed at encouraging the impoverished to empower themselves, adhere to the maxim of saving for the future, and use those resources when in need (Batra, 2018). Theoretically, microfinance, sometimes referred to as microcredit or microlending (Arunkumar et al., 2016); (Mathur & Agarwal, 2017); (Bali Swain & Wallentin, 2012), entails the provision of smaller working capital loans for self-employed (P. Sharma et al., 2008) or potentially self-employed impoverished individuals (Si et al., 2020).

In the majority of underdeveloped economies, the absence of entrepreneurship impedes the economic expansion that contributes to the eradication of poverty (Roy et al., 2019); (Susmita et al., 2018). It significantly contributes to the nation's economic and social development by fostering entrepreneurship and generating a vast number of employment opportunities at relatively lower capital costs than agriculture (Raghuvanshi et al., 2019). The Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India, issued the Sixth Economic Census in 2016, which shows that women make up about 12% of the Micro-Small-Medium Enterprise (MSME) sector (Hasan et al., 2019) i.e., 8 million out of the total 67 million entrepreneurs. In India, more than 90% of companies run by women are micro-enterprises (MEs), of which 79% are self-financed. Women entrepreneurs contribute considerably to the reduction of poverty, the increase in per capita income, and the creation of jobs, as evidenced above (Shehu & Mahmood, 2014); (Tiwari, 2017). Recent research (2022–2025) furnishes compelling evidence that micro-enterprises serve as potent catalysts for women's empowerment, particularly when bolstered by financial resources, skills development, and substantial social networks. Their effects go beyond money to include social standing, decision-making for the family, and community involvement. Well-planned micro-enterprise projects are a long-term method to promote gender equality and inclusive development.

Literature Review

Improvement in the rural economy and living conditions was significantly aided by the presence of Self-Help Groups (SHGs). Microfinance programs have helped the rural impoverished improve their quality of life and meet all of their credit needs (Shehu & Mahmood, 2014); (Akanji, 2001); (Chhay, 2011). Therefore, the concept of SHGs has become a new innovation in rural development (Mathur & Agarwal, 2017). It was discovered that SHGs had organized themselves to manage their economic activities and to empower women in all directions (Roy et al., 2019); (Swain & Wallentin, 2009a) which were suited to their needs and interests. Their confidence grew due to the increase in their relative financial autonomy and the sense of security it afforded them. SHGs have acquired specific leadership attributes, including the ability to arrange gatherings, act as an intermediary between non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and government representatives, coordinate activities, and inspire group members (Sangeetha et al., 2013). SHGs had ushered in a quiet revolution for the economic empowerment of rural women (Arunkumar et al., 2016); (Mathur & Agarwal, 2017). SHGs are the only way to catalyse the socioeconomic development of the rural poor in Indian villages (Y. H. Sultana et al., 2017).

In India, women from diverse social, economic, political, regional, and linguistic backgrounds make up fifty percent of the country's population (Das & Guha, 2019). The socioeconomic status of women is essential to a nation's overall growth and development (Y. H. Sultana et al., 2017); (Mamoon, 2015). In the past few years, the Indian government launched several programs and schemes for the development of women to accomplish its aim of broadening access to autonomous decision-making and resource control, making them at par with their male counterparts to achieve the ultimate result of complete growth. Entrepreneurs contribute to the creation of jobs (Foo et al., 2020), even though unemployment is India's most pressing problem. Women are encouraged to launch their businesses through SHGs. In India, SHGs contribute significantly to the growth of female entrepreneurship (P. Sharma et al., 2008), (Chatterjee et al., 2018). Empowering women in India through education, finances, and employment is a crucial step toward granting them leadership roles (Shambharkar et al., 2012). However, the most notable move toward constructive transformation has been made via the region's governance methods and policies. Technology is increasingly serving as a potent equaliser for female entrepreneurs. Women-led small businesses are acquiring the visibility and financial autonomy required to achieve long-term success by adopting strategic fintech solutions and digital networking (Swartz, Scheepers & Toefy, 2022, Ojo, et. al., 2022, and Amoo, et. al., 2024).

The present study employs the widely established concept of "Learned Hopefulness," initially proposed by Zimmerman ((M. A. Zimmerman, 1990). It investigates an individual's capacity to apply skills acquired in one context to novel circumstances. This theory delves into the psychological aspects of personal growth and empowerment, particularly focusing on an individual's confidence and aspiration to exert control over their circumstances. It posits that individuals who have developed certain skills in one area of their lives can transfer these skills to new, unfamiliar situations, thereby fostering resilience and adaptability. In the context of rural women's entrepreneurship, the Learned Hopefulness Theory is especially pertinent because it elucidates how women can leverage their existing abilities to overcome barriers and seize new opportunities. This theory highlights the importance of self-efficacy, which is the belief in one's ability to succeed in specific situations. For rural women, many of whom may face significant socio-economic challenges, building self-efficacy is crucial. It not only helps them navigate the complexities of starting and running a business but also empowers them to take proactive steps toward achieving their entrepreneurial goals.

The multifaceted character of women's empowerment, which includes economic, social, and political aspects, has been underscored in recent scholarly investigations. Researchers argue that empowerment involves not only increasing women's access to resources and opportunities but also enhancing their agency and decision-making power within households and communities (Kabeer, 2020). Studies highlight the importance of context-specific interventions in promoting the empowerment of women, recognizing that successful approaches in one environment may not necessarily be applicable in another. For example, to advance women's economic empowerment, interventions must consider how social norms, cultural practices, and institutional barriers influence the opportunities and limitations that women experience (Al Hakim et al., 2022). Recent literature on self-help organizations underscores their role as vehicles for collective action and social change. Scholars emphasize the importance of participatory approaches that empower members to identify and address their own needs, leading to sustainable development outcomes (Venugopalan et al., 2021); (Ng et al., 2022). Existing research indicates that self-help organizations have the potential to cultivate social capital and solidarity among their members, thereby promoting the mobilization of resources, exchange of knowledge, and engagement in advocacy endeavors. Organizations that advocate for collective efficacy and mutual support foster both individual empowerment and community resilience (Alrefaei et al., 2023); (Devi, 2024). Recent research has brought attention to the notable impact that micro-enterprises have on reducing poverty and driving economic expansion, especially in low-income and marginalized communities. The significance of entrepreneurship in fostering inclusive development, generating income, and establishing livelihood opportunities is underscored by scholars (Pratikto et al., 2023); (Huang et al., 2023); (del Olmo-García et al., 2023). Sinniah (2022) expresses that agility and flexibility markedly enhanced post-COVID operational performance in micro enterprises, although firm size exerted no significant moderating influence. Scholarly investigations concerning micro-enterprises emphasise the criticality of ecosystems that foster entrepreneurship. Micro-enterprises, particularly those led by women and marginalized groups, are significantly influenced by favourable policy frameworks, market linkages, access to capital, and business development services (Rakshit & Bardhan, 2023). Social enterprises and women's involvement in small-scale businesses can improve their social standing and standard of living (Agrawal et al, 2023). Empowering outcomes are substantially influenced by profitability, market access, and sustainability, rather than mere participation. Initially, micro-enterprise performance was adversely affected, as evidenced by the post-COVID literature. However, recovery was contingent upon resilience capabilities, financial planning, and adaptive strategies (Rahman, M. F et al 2024).

In brief, contemporary scholarly works underscore the interrelated nature of micro-enterprises, self-help organizations, and women's empowerment as catalysts for inclusive development and societal transformation. To be effective, interventions must acknowledge the intricate dynamics that are in operation, confront systemic obstacles, and harness the capabilities of collaborative efforts and entrepreneurship to promote gender parity and sustainable development objectives.

Participation Of Kerala's Working-Age Population In The Labor Force

The Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) of women in the state of Kerala is lower than the national average. While the male LFPR is higher than the female average, the gap at the national level is between 28 and 30 percent. In Kerala, female LFPR is approximately 34 percent lower than male participation. The male labour force participation rate ranges between 50 to 54 percent, while the female rate falls between 19 to 25 percent, a difference of 25 percent. Male rates in Kerala range from 44 to 53 percent, while female rates are 16 to 18 percent. Table 1 presents the LFPR status.

Table 1: Workforce Participation Rate

Year	India			Kerala		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
1981	52.6	19.7	36.7	44.9	16.6	30.5
1991	51.6	22.3	37.5	47.6	15.9	31.4
2001	51.8	25.8	39.2	50.4	15.4	32.3
2011	53.2	25.5	39.8	52.7	18.2	34.8

Source: Census of India, 1981, 1991, 2001, 2011

Evidently, Kerala's high literacy rate and impressive levels of female education did not materialize into a rapid increase in women's employment or social mobility.

Kudumbashree Project In Kerala State

In 1998, the state government of Kerala launched the anti-poverty programme, Kudumbashree through the State Poverty Eradication Mission (SPEM). In accordance with the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, this project is carried out by Local Self-Government entities. The term “Kudumbashree” in Malayalam translates to "family prosperity," an initiative sought to completely abolish poverty in rural and urban Kerala within 10 years and provide equitable economic possibilities for disadvantaged women (*Kudumbashree-State Poverty Eradication Mission*, n.d.). Kudumbashree Project is an innovative programme for eradication of poverty by the Government of Kerala that is in every way community-based, women-oriented, and participatory approach. Local governments within the state are implementing the Kudumbashree Project. It was actively supported by the federal government and NABARD. Through the form of community-based organizations (CBOs), the government encouraged the link between SHGs and banks (John, 2009). It combined the SHG approach with the convergence of available services and resources based on customer demand. Under the Kudumbashree Project, the SHG was known as the neighborhood group (NHG) and the NHG bank linkage scheme (identical to the SHG bank linkage scheme) was one of the program's flagship initiatives (*Annual Administration Report*, 2017).

The evaluation of women's empowerment through Group Micro-enterprises (GMEs) under the Kudumbashree Project in Kerala is the focus of this study. The Kudumbashree Project plays a vital role in promoting rural development in Kerala. In Kerala, thrift and credit societies serve the rural impoverished as doorstep banks (S R & Kumar S, 2018); (Panackal, Nehajoan, Archana Singh, 2017); (OOMMEN, 2008). The role of the income-generating activities initiated by the Kudumbashree Project requires special consideration and should be evaluated (S R & Kumar S, 2018). This study focused primarily on the role of Kudumbashree micro-enterprises in Kerala in empowering women and proposed strategies for improving their performance (Singh, S., & Kangjam, B, 2025)

Research Objectives

A micro-enterprise is a business that was established, owned, and managed by a women's self-help organization (Agyapong et al., 2017); (Shingla & Singh, 2015) with fewer than twenty members (Economic Review, 2021), designed to eradicate poverty in the state. This study aims to evaluate the impact of micro-enterprises on the economic, social, political, and familial empowerment of members of Kudumbashree group micro-enterprises in the state of Kerala.

Theoretical Framework

The empowerment of women is a complex (Kabeer, 1999a); (M. Zimmerman, 2000) and multifaceted phenomenon (Kabeer, 2005); (N.Amudha, 2010); (Richardson, 2017) influenced by various interconnected factors in a woman's life (Pitt et al., 2006). It is widely debated among scholars, some of whom perceive empowerment as a dynamic process (Malhotra & Schuler, 2002); (Batliwala, 2007), while others define it as an outcome (Duflo, 2011); (S. Hemavathy Nithyanandhan, 2015); (Mahmud et al., 2012). There are also perspectives that encompass both the ongoing process and an outcome (Kabeer, 1999b); (Goldman & Little, 2015). This diversity in viewpoints highlights the intricate nature of women's empowerment, necessitating a comprehensive understanding of its different dimensions for scholarly analysis.

Empowerment is a gradual process (Kabeer, 1999c) triggered by numerous factors (Nayak & Panigrahi, 2020). According to the theoretical framework, it is expected that a woman's significant choices are shaped by factors like her educational attainment, income potential, social consciousness, decision-making authority within the family, and similar aspects. In this study, women's empowerment was assessed through four interconnected dimensions: economic, familial, political, and social, each of which was gauged using multiple indicators.

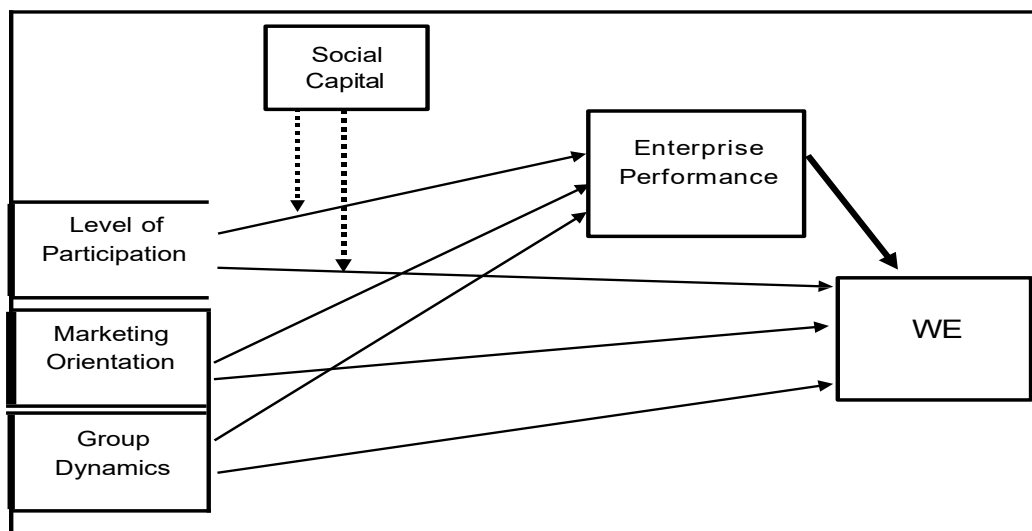
The study adheres to the concept proposed by Kabeer (Kabeer, 1999a), which asserts that it involves enhancing individuals' capacity to make deliberate life decisions in a setting where such capacity was previously withheld from them. The definition also proposes that empowerment is a dynamic process of transformation, it is a shift from a state of disempowerment to a state of increased empowerment. The current study utilizes the well accepted notion of "Learned Hopefulness," which was introduced by Zimmerman (M. A. Zimmerman, 1990). The theory elucidates the connection between participation and empowerment. The utilization of a participatory methodology is employed to foster empowerment of women through SHGs, while the concept of learned hopefulness elucidates this approach. Consequently, researchers employed this idea as the fundamental basis for this research.

Conceptual Framework

It is a study that attempts to measure the effect of government schemes that are intended to promote women's empowerment and poverty alleviation through group micro-enterprises. Additionally, it seeks to examine the role of enterprise performance in mediating women's empowerment. Based on the literature review, a conceptual framework was developed to analyze the association between Level of Participation (LOP), Marketing Orientation (MO), and Group Dynamics (GD) in predicting Enterprise Performance (EP) and Women's Empowerment. In this model, enterprise performance may act as a mediator in the relationship between LOP, MO, GD, and SC on Women's Empowerment. The model has employed multi-facets of micro-enterprises (LOP, MO, and GD) as the independent variables, and social capital (SC) acts as a moderator in the relationship between LOP and EP and in the relationship between LOP and WE.

A theoretical framework has been established to fulfil the objectives of the research. The following conceptual framework has been constructed by the researcher after a thorough overview of the collected research studies. Figure 1 depicts a conceptual model of the relationship among the variables used in this study.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



Methodology

The study relies on data acquired from a survey of individual participants who are members of micro-enterprises owned by a group operating under the Kudumbashree Mission in the state of Kerala. A sample size of 540 individuals from micro-enterprises was selected to evaluate the influence of micro-enterprises on women's empowerment. The method of multistage random sampling was employed to gather samples from the individuals belonging to micro-enterprises. This method improved the validity and dependability of the research results. This facilitated the inclusion of participants from diverse demographic backgrounds and geographic locations, thereby ensuring representation at every stage or level. This increases the generalizability of the findings to the population being investigated. Moreover, it facilitates the incorporation of varied viewpoints and contextual factors into the research.

The main requirement for sample selection is that individuals must have engaged in enterprise activities for at least three years, with the assumption that the impact can be successfully researched owing to the members and that the firms would have achieved a generally stable state during this period. The sample size for the present study was determined using Cochran's formula (Cochran, 1977) which is specifically designed for quantitative data in a finite population.

$$n = \left(\frac{1.96 \times 0.357}{0.030} \right)^2 \sqrt{\frac{33,784 - 544}{33,784 - 1}} = 540$$

540 members of the GMEs under the Kudumbashree Project in Kerala were taken as the final sample size for the study.

The research instrument employed in the present study is the self-administrated semi-structured questionnaire, which was developed on par with the needs of this study. After conducting a systematic literature review, the instrument was developed. The constructs used to measure key variables were adapted from previously developed scales and modified to fit the context of the research study.

Four indicators, such as economic empowerment factors, social empowerment factors, family empowerment factors, and political empowerment factors, were used to quantify the empowerment of women as the dependent variable. LOP, SC, MO, and GD were the micro-enterprises components that were identified as the independent variables for the study. EP is gauged based on respondent's perceptions of their organization's performance. To examine the relations among these variables, hypotheses were framed and tested. All the

indicators were surveyed at a single point in time. The constructs were measured using a five-point Likert scale (Allen & Seaman, 2007) and validated through EFA and CFA. Further, normality, communalities, linearity, reliability, and validity of the constructs were established prior to the analysis. Statistical techniques were applied using software packages such as IBM SPSS 24.0, and AMOS 24.0. Path analysis has been performed to estimate the significance of the hypothesized relationship between variables under the study.

This path analysis focuses primarily on addressing the five major hypotheses listed below:

Hypotheses 1: The level of participation, marketing orientation, group dynamics and the social capital of the woman members are positively related to the business performance of the GMEs.

Hypotheses 2: The business performance of the GMEs is positively associated with the empowerment of woman members of the GMEs.

Hypotheses 3: The level of participation, marketing orientation, group dynamics, and the social capital of the woman members are positively related to their empowerment.

Hypotheses 4: The business performance of the GMEs mediates the positive effect of the level of participation, marketing orientation, group dynamics, and the social capital of the woman members on the empowerment of the group members.

Hypotheses 5: The business performance mediated the positive moderation effect of social capital and level of participation to the empowerment of the woman members of the GMEs in Kerala.

All five hypotheses relating the relationship between antecedents and the performance of micro-enterprises and attributes of women's empowerment were tested using structural equation modelling technique.

Results

The descriptive statistics method is used to describe the characteristics of the respondents who participated in the study. Path analysis has been performed to estimate the magnitude and significance of hypothesized relationships between women's empowerment, enterprise performance, and its four antecedents, viz., level of participation, marketing orientation, group dynamics, and the social capital of the woman members of the GMEs. All these constructs incorporated in the model have been identified and validated through EFA and CFA. The path model enabled us to estimate the direct and indirect effects of the five factors on the empowerment of women members of the GMEs.

Socio-Demographic Background of the Respondents

Table 2 outlines the sociodemographic characteristics of the women micro-entrepreneurs who took part in the survey.

Table 2: Socio-demographic Background

<i>Factors</i>		<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Age</i>	<i>Up to 35</i>	35	6.5
	<i>36-40</i>	121	22.4
	<i>41-45</i>	98	18.1
	<i>46-50</i>	158	29.3
	<i>51-55</i>	54	10.0
	<i>56 & above</i>	74	13.7

<i>Marital status</i>	<i>Married</i>	488	90.4
	<i>Unmarried</i>	11	2.0
	<i>Others</i>	41	7.6
<i>Location</i>	<i>Rural</i>	459	85.0
	<i>Urban</i>	81	15.0
<i>Educational Qualification</i>	<i>Below SSLC</i>	197	36.5
	<i>SSLC</i>	165	30.5
	<i>HSE/ PDC</i>	117	21.7
	<i>Graduation & above</i>	61	11.3
<i>Total Monthly Household Income (Rs.)</i>	<i>Up to 20,000</i>	69	12.8
	<i>20,001 - 25, 000</i>	148	27.4
	<i>25,001 - 30, 000</i>	125	23.1
	<i>30, 001 - 35,000</i>	77	14.3
	<i>35,001 - 40,000</i>	68	12.6
	<i>Above 40,000</i>	53	9.8
<i>Duration of association of respondents with microenterprises</i>	<i>3- 4 Yrs</i>	66	12.2
	<i>4 -6 Yrs</i>	257	47.6
	<i>6-8 Yrs</i>	53	9.8
	<i>8-10 Yrs</i>	125	23.1
	<i>More than 10 Yrs</i>	39	7.3

Source: Survey data

Generally, the respondents were married women aged above 45 with qualification exceeding SSLC. The majority of them belong to a backward class and hailed from rural background. Household income ranged between 14,000 and 57,000 rupees. 47% of participants have engaged in micro-enterprise endeavors for a period ranging from 4 to 6 years.

Micro-Enterprise Performance On Women Empowerment

SEM analysis is employed to examine the association between observable and unobservable factors. It is an appropriate statistical technique for evaluating the cause-and-effect relationship with the chosen variables. CFA is conducted to construct a measurement model with the goal of assessing the degree of alignment between the model and the data set. First and foremost, the dependability of the data is evaluated, followed by an assessment of its convergent validity.

Nine constructs identified using EFA, and Cronbach's alpha was used to establish the internal consistency of these constructs. Cronbach's alpha indicates that all nine constructs are reliable because the estimated value of the alpha coefficient is greater than 0.70, which is the threshold value. It suggests that all these subscales and primary scales were largely free of random error and, as a result, reliable. Therefore, these constructions will be utilised for further analysis in the study.

Model Fit Indices

Measurement of fit indices were returned excellent interpretation. This was performed prior to structural equation modeling.

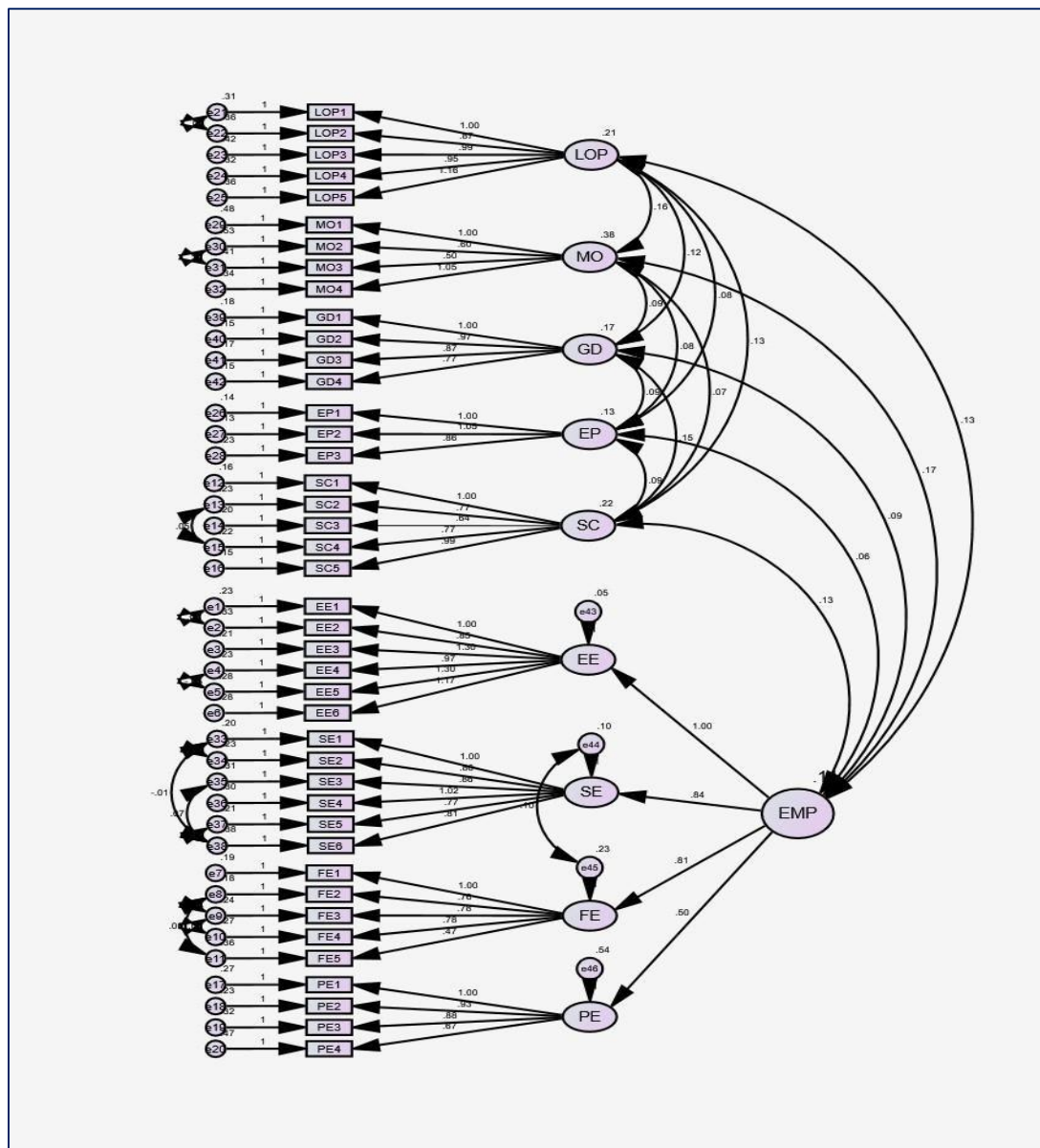
Table 3: Model Fit Indices

Sl. No	Measure	Estimate	Cut-off Criteria*			Interpretation
			Terrible	Acceptable	Excellent	
1	CMIN	1525.967	--	--	--	--
2	DF	787	--	--	--	--
3	CMIN/DF	1.939	< 5	< 3	<1	Acceptable
4	CFI	0.911	<0.90	<0.95	>0.95	Acceptable
5	SRMR	0.052	>0.10	>0.08	<0.08	Excellent
6	RMSEA	0.042	>0.08	>0.06	<0.06	Excellent
7	P Close	1.000	<0.01	<0.05	>0.05	Excellent

Measurement Model Used In The Study

SEM technique is employed to assess the influence of both external and internal factors on the antecedents and outcomes of micro-enterprises run by women. Consequently, it establishes a pathway for the concurrent examination of the complete model to explore different potential connections. This procedure involves conducting a two-step test. Initially, the underlying elements of a measurement model are analyzed, subsequently followed by the theoretical connection between all variables in a structural equation model. The theoretical development section proposes assumptions that characterize nine latent constructs derived from 42 observable data. All factor loadings in the current model were statistically significant at a level of <1%, as shown in the table. In addition, all but one of the standard item loadings were over the minimum cut-off level of 0.50, and around 76% of the loadings were above the desired level of 0.70. It demonstrates the scales' convergent validity. Subsequently, the results are presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Estimated measurement model.



Validity Of The Constructs

Table 4: Validity Test: Construct Reliability (CR), Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and Correlation Matrix

Sl. No.	Construct	CR	AVE	SC	LOP	EP	MO	GD	EMP
1	SC	0.892	0.627	0.792					
2	LOP	0.852	0.536	0.606	0.732				
3	EP	0.818	0.603	0.538	0.461	0.776			
4	MO	0.795	0.501	0.258	0.560	0.361	0.708		
5	GD	0.881	0.649	0.756	0.609	0.607	0.361	0.805	
6	EMP	0.815	0.549	0.723	0.725	0.462	0.702	0.582	0.741

Table 4 demonstrates that the latent constructs possess factor loading values that range from 0.758 to 0.916, suggesting strong evidence of validity for each construct. The mean-variance was obtained for all antecedents and outcomes of micro-enterprises run by women above the threshold of 0.50. Moreover, the composite reliability coefficient values for all latent constructs are above 0.70, signifying that the model presents a strong internal reliability. Further univariate and multivariate normality tests were performed, and the results indicated the absence of problematic univariate and multivariate non-normality issues.

Structural Equation Modelling -The Estimated Path Model

The proposed hypotheses were examined to determine the stability of the proposed measurement model with the current data set. Figure 3 illustrates the potential correlation among the different components. There are a total of five hypotheses, and the path significance level is set at 0.05. The purpose of the study is to validate the existence of a substantial and favorable correlation between the variables. The estimated path model and standardized coefficients between the variables are depicted in Figure 3.

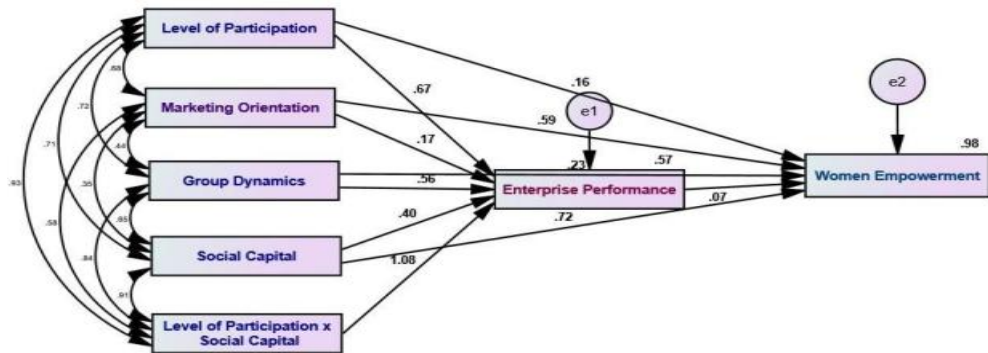


Figure 3: The estimated path model with standardized coefficients

All the path coefficients were statistically significant at = .05 percent level of significance, moreover, all the coefficients were positive too.

Direct Effects

Table 5: Direct Effects- Estimates of total (direct and indirect) effects of the model

Sl. No.	Nature of the Structural Relationship	UN-standardized Parameter Estimates	Standardized Parameter Estimates	p	Sig... @
1	LOP → EP	.504	.666	.011	**
2	MO → EP	.099	.171	.001	***
3	GD → EP	.461	.564	.001	***
4	SC → EP	.281	.397	.011	**
5	(LOP x SC) → EP	.136	1.082	.023	**

6	$EP \rightarrow WE$	.079	.073	.001	***
7	$LOP \rightarrow WE$	.168	.205	.001	***
8	$MO \rightarrow WE$	.362	.576	.001	***
9	$GD \rightarrow WE$	.243	.274	.001	***
10	$SC \rightarrow WE$	.575	.748	.001	***
11	$(LOP \times SC) \rightarrow WE$	.011	.079	.016	**

As displayed in Table 5, level of participation ($\beta = .666, p < .001$), marketing orientation ($\beta = .171, p < .001$), group dynamics ($\beta = .564, p < .001$) and the social capital ($\beta = .397, p = .024$) of woman members of the GMEs exhibited statistically significant positive direct effects on the enterprise performance of their GMEs. There was a statistically significant and positive interaction effect of the level of participation and the social capital ($\beta = 1.082, p = .001$) on the enterprise performance of their GMEs. It signifies the existence of a positive moderation effect of the social capital in the relationship between the level of participation and enterprise performance. Similarly, enterprise performance ($\beta = .073, p < .001$), level of participation ($\beta = .156, p < .001$), marketing orientation ($\beta = .589, p < .001$), group dynamics ($\beta = .233, p < .001$), and the social capital ($\beta = .719, p < .001$) of woman members of the GMEs in Kerala showed statistically significant positive direct effects on their empowerment.

These results suggest that keeping other things constant, an increase in the level of participation, marketing orientation, group dynamics, and the social capital of woman members directly leads to an increase in the business performance of the GMEs in Kerala. Moreover, an increase in the business performance of the GMEs, in turn, leads to an increase in the empowerment of woman members of the GMEs in Kerala. These results provide empirical support to the first two hypotheses: **H1** and **H2** that were in the previous section.

The indirect interaction effect of the level of participation and the social capital ($\beta = .079, p = .016$) on the women's empowerment was positive and statistically significant. The results suggest that the business performance of the GMEs mediated the positive effect of the level of participation, marketing orientation, group dynamics, and the social capital of woman members on the empowerment of the group members. Furthermore, it has mediated the positive moderation effect of social capital and the level of participation in the empowerment of the woman members of the GMEs in Kerala. These results suggest that the third, fourth and fifth hypothesis of this section is empirically supported. It is interesting to note that the four antecedent variables *viz.*, the level of participation, marketing orientation, group dynamics, and the social capital of woman members had statistically significant direct as well as indirect effect on the empowerment of the woman members of the GMEs.

Discussions

The results of SEM analysis showed that an increase in the level of participation, marketing orientation, group dynamics, and the level of social capital directly leads to an increase in the business performance of the GMEs. Moreover, an increase in the business performance of the GMEs, in turn, leads to an increase in the empowerment of woman respondents. Further it was found that the level of participation was the major factor influencing the business performance directly, which was followed by the group dynamics and social capital. On the other hand, social marketing the most important factor directly affecting women's empowerment followed by the marketing orientation and group dynamics. Beyond, the squared multiple correlation (R^2) value indicates that the explained variance of the dependent variable Enterprise Performance was 56.9%, while that of Women Empowerment was 97.6%, indicating an excellent goodness of fit of the model. The study found that there exists a significant positive moderation effect of social capital in the relationship between the level of participation and

enterprise performance. The SEM analysis revealed that the four antecedent variables, namely the level of participation, marketing orientation, group dynamics, and the social capital of woman members, had statistically significant direct and indirect effects on the empowerment of the woman members of the GMEs under the Kudumbashree Project in Kerala. It indicates that enterprise performance partially mediated the positive relationship between the level of participation, marketing orientation, group dynamics, and social capital of woman members with the empowerment of these members under the Kudumbashree Project in Kerala.

The establishment of micro-enterprises enables women to acquire the necessary skills, resources, and empowerment in various aspects. The engagement of women in micro enterprises has greatly contributed to the success and empowerment of women. The study aims to evaluate the factors that contribute to the establishment and outcomes of micro-firms run by women. The results validated that factors such as level of preparation, market orientation, and social capital serve as the foundation for the performance of small businesses. Micro firms enhance their financial reserves and allocate funds towards investments, pursue financial assistance from banks, and maintain a harmonious equilibrium between income and expenditures within their households.

Conclusion

The economic involvement of women is essential not only for mitigating the unequal levels of poverty among women but also for augmenting household income and promoting economic expansion. Societies should shift their perception of women from being passive beneficiaries of assistance to being active catalysts for social change. In the Indian context, self-help groups have emerged as a major focus of development interventions aiming to empower women economically and socially. Women's economic empowerment and participation are increasingly recognized as vital to gender equality, poverty reduction, and inclusive development (Shirisha et al., 2018). However, women often face constraints in accessing economic opportunities due to discriminatory laws, norms, and lack of skills and resources (Sharaunga et al., 2019). This highlights the need for targeted policies and interventions to promote women's entrepreneurship and enterprise development. Several studies have examined the multidimensional benefits of enhancing women's economic engagement. Increased participation in income-generating activities can help reduce female poverty (Sebastian & P.K, 2020), increase household incomes and well-being (Sujisha, A. S. and Biju, 2019), and foster broader economic growth by boosting productivity and output (Hasan et al., 2019). SHGs and microfinance initiatives have been identified as important strategies for providing women access to finance, assets, and enterprise opportunities, thereby empowering them economically and socially (Mulyungi, 2018). To further women's economic empowerment, governments should develop supportive laws, policies and programs aimed at expanding women's entrepreneurship and enterprise development (Jain & Munuswamy, 2022). Key measures include increasing access to capital and financial services, providing business development training, strengthening market linkages, and promoting enabling cultural and institutional environments (Xie et al., 2021). Special attention should be given to socially and economically marginalized women, who tend to face greater barriers (Fathima et al., 2022). The study findings suggest that enterprise performance serves as a mediator in the correlation between women's empowerment and micro-enterprises, encompassing aspects such as their level of participation, marketing orientation, group dynamics, and social capital of women members. These findings underscore the significant influence of micro-enterprises established under the Kudumbashree Mission on the lives of women in Kerala. Consequently, women may experience improvements in various facets of their lives, including assets, family dynamics, societal engagement, and public perception.

This study makes important contributions to literature in several ways. First, it develops a multi-faceted measure of micro-enterprise participation, assessing various dimensions of engagement rather than just membership. Secondly, it introduces a context-specific and inclusive scale for assessing women's empowerment, encompassing four essential domains, which include economic, familial, social, and political. This novel metric can aid future researchers examining women's empowerment in developing country contexts, particularly in South Asia. Finally, the findings offer valuable insights for government agencies and NGOs working on women's empowerment initiatives, highlighting the potential of the Kudumbashree self-help group model pioneered in

Kerala. In summary, the study greatly enhances our comprehension of how to conceptualize, assess, and encourage both micro-enterprise participation and women's empowerment in developing nations. The study's limitations include that it was conducted solely based on the perceptions of the respondents. The possibility of bias that could affect the reliability and quality of the collected data cannot be ruled out. The majority of the primary data collected from respondents was based on a recall method and, therefore subject to normal recall errors. In the study, micro-enterprises that were closed earlier were not included. Hence, the findings are limited to the ongoing micro-enterprises only. Additionally, the study did not employ the interview method for data collection, and the analysis relies solely on primary survey results.

The future scope of this research encompasses opportunities and challenges encountered by women-owned micro-enterprises amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, there exists the possibility for comprehensive inquiries regarding the formulation of efficacious marketing tactics customized exclusively for micro-enterprises. An additional area that warrants investigation is comparative research that examines successful and unsuccessful micro-enterprises intending to identify the fundamental factors that contribute to their success or lack thereof. The study's findings suggest that to ensure the long-term sustainability of group-owned microenterprises, policymakers must enhance the supportive mechanisms, which include skill development, financial accessibility and marketing support to the members. In addition, the results suggest that the Kudumbashree Mission, NGOs, and MFIs should implement targeted interventions to encourage political education and leadership training among their members.

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