

Rural Women Empowerment Through Microfinancing: A Lesson From Central Kerala

Beena George
Bishop Kurialacherry College

Abstract

Governmental and Non-Governmental Organizations are doing yeoman service in the field of rural women empowerment through their micro financing programmes. As a state offering its own model of development, the scenario in Kerala is relevant and significant. This study analyses the contributions of Kudumbasree Mission, the Governmental organization and Changanassery Social Service Society (CHASS) and World Vision of India, the Non-Governmental organizations in rural women empowerment. It is found that active participation and income generating activities have made tremendous impact on economic empowerment of rural women. These could be seen in terms of their employment, income, savings, assets holding capacities and standard of living. The Multiple Linear Regression analysis has identified family size, annual family income, and duration of participation in the organization as the key factors contributing towards empowerment.

Introduction

Women form the backbone of any economy. They are the only way to build a sustainable, just, and developed society. The advancement of women and the achievement of equality between women and men are a matter of human rights and a precondition for social justice. It should not, therefore, be seen in isolation as a women's issue. It is a developmental issue and bypassing women in development programmes means leaving almost half of the human resources outside development intervention.

The all-round development and harmonious growth of the nation would be possible only when women are considered as equal partners in progress. Effective empowerment of women is essential to harness the women force and bring them into the main stream of economic development. The underprivileged in the rural areas especially women have been engulfed in a vicious circle of poverty and patriarchal grip for a long time and have lost their initiative to come out and have developed a passive attitude towards development programmes meant for the well-being of rural areas. This can be corrected only through the empowerment of rural women. Rural women empowerment means increasing self-reliance among them.

During the 1990s, with the shift from Women in Development (WID) to Gender and Development (GAD), political rather than economic aspects of development became the focus of concern. Along with gender mainstreaming, empowerment of women emerged as the main issue of concern. As a process, it demands a life-cycle approach. It aims at redistribution of social power and control of resources in favour of women based on development strategy (Christa Wichterich 1995)¹. In this approach, "empowerment cannot be given, it must be self-generated (Kabeer N, 1995). All that a gender-transformative policy can hope to do is to provide women with enabling resources which will allow them to take greater control of their own lives, to determine what kinds of gender relations they would want to live within, and to devise the strategies and alliances to help them get there. So the idea was that transformative change presupposes the empowerment of women.

In a developing country like India, where the soul of the nation lies in the villages, empowering rural women carries utmost weight and significance. Development experience shows that gender inequalities are a major factor impeding progress. This is particularly true in rural areas, where women are generally involved in productive work but lack access to assets they need to play their roles effectively. As a result of this imbalance, rural women are often more vulnerable to poverty than men, and their limited ability to independently secure assets makes them more likely to be negatively affected by ongoing changes in rural markets and institutions. In order to improve the status and position of women at home and in the society at large, it is necessary to achieve economic independence for women. For women, opportunity for productive work is not merely a means for higher income, but a source of self-respect leading to the development of her personality, and gives a sense of participation in the common purpose of the society. The low status of women in large segments of our society cannot be raised without further opening up of opportunities for independent employment and income. The concept of economic empowerment is, thus, a sine qua non for elevating the status of rural women in our society. If rural women are economically empowered, it becomes much easier for them to become socially empowered. This realization has been the impetus for the various micro finance programmes.

Data source and methodology

In the first stage of sampling, three districts i.e. Kottayam, Alappuzha, and Pathanamthitta were selected from Central Kerala.² They were selected purposefully because together with the governmental initiative of Kudumbasree³, non-governmental organizations like CHASS⁴ and World Vision of India⁵ are active and fully engaged in the empowerment of rural women folk in these areas.

In the second stage, three administrative blocks each from Kottayam, Alappuzha, and Pathanamthitta districts were selected. These areas have a concentration of the activities of the selected NGOs.

In the third stage, one panchayat from each block was selected. The criteria for this selection were economic backwardness and the presence of the selected NGOs.

In the fourth stage, 51 wards were selected from the nine selected grama panchayats. Along with the Kudumbasree units, SHGs⁶ of CHASS and World Vision were present only in these 51 wards in the selected panchayats.

In the fifth stage, 25% of the total number of SHGs/ Kudumbasree units were selected randomly from each ward. 320 SHGs/Kudumbasree units were thus selected. Among these, 174 were Kudumbasree units/NHGs⁷, 83 were SHGs of World Vision, and 63 were SHGs of CHASS.

In the final stage, 10% of the total 7008 women beneficiaries⁸ from the selected SHGs/Kudumbasree units were selected. The size of the sample thus selected was 700. The selected women beneficiaries⁷ had a minimum of two years of participation in the programmes as the impact

would be measurable only in such cases. The sample included women who were engaged in both income generating activities (IGAs) and those who were not.

Impact on Economic Empowerment

Since economic empowerment is a sine qua non for all other levels of empowerment; activities and programmes in that direction assume top priority. This level of empowerment can be measured in terms of employment and income generation, savings, expenditure, asset holding, repayment, and liabilities.

1. Employment

Both the GOs and the NGOs have implemented various schemes to generate employment for their beneficiaries. The large number of women employed through them bears testimony to the need and efficacy of such schemes. They aim at making women self-reliant and improving their standard of living. They try to uplift the poor women from their deprived conditions by helping them find some source of income.

The respondents are poor, having low levels of education. Hence, it is difficult for them to search and find any employment. Membership in Kudumbasree units and the SHGs of CHASS and World Vision has enabled the women to start some form of income generating activities. Out of the 700 respondents, 411 (58.7%) women have Income Generating Activities and 289 (41.3%) remain as mere beneficiaries. NGOs have the largest number (66.8%) of the respondents who have IGAs. GOs have 55.5%, and both GOs and NGOs have 55.0%.

There are two motivating factors for the respondents deciding to start an enterprise/IGA. 239(58.2%) women started some form of IGA in order to earn some additional income. Since the cost of living is going up day by day, the women find that, most of the time, their husbands' income is not sufficient to meet all the needs of their families. So they either approach money lenders, or pawn their ornaments. However, such measures will not solve their problems; rather they will land these women into more debts and other liabilities. So these women want to generate some additional income to support their husbands. On the other hand, 172 (41.8%) women are of the opinion that apart from earning something, they want to save something for their future also. They say that financial problems will always be there in their lives; therefore they need to find solutions not only for the present problems, but for the future ones as well. They feel that developing saving habits among the women is a must for meeting their emergencies in the future. While the number of respondents in the GOs and NGOs starting an IGA for additional income is more or less the same (56.1% and 56.3% respectively), the number of those who are members of both GOs and NGOs doing so is quite high (70.9%).

As far as the types of IGAs are concerned, it is found that 259 (63.0%) women who have IGAs are engaged in petty businesses like soap and soap powder, rice powder, pickles, bakery items, curry powder etc, as they require less investment. Next come cattle rearing and poultry farming with 106 (25.8%) women (Table.). Women engaged in these activities are of the opinion that they choose such type of activities as they require less training, and are less time-consuming. At the same time, they can easily manage their household activities along with their IGAs. 21 women (5.1%) are engaged in agricultural activities like cultivating vegetables, tapioca, ginger, and sweet potatoes; 18 (4.4%) have tailoring units; and 7 women (1.7%) run grocery shops. While 69.2% members of GOs and 61.8% members of both GOs and NGOs are engaged in petty businesses, only 53.3% members in the NGOs do so. However, the number of those engaged in agricultural activities and cattle rearing/poultry farming is more in the case of NGOs (11.1% and 31.1% respectively against 2.7% and 22.2% for GOs).

Table 1. Organizationwise distribution of respondents according to type/ category of enterprise/IGA

Category of organisation	Category of enterprise/IGA					Total
	Agriculture	Petty Business	Cattle rearing/ poultry farming	Tailoring	Grocery	
GOs	6	153	49	6	7	221
	2.7%	69.2%	22.2%	2.7%	3.2%	100.0%
NGOs	15	72	42	6	0	135
	11.1%	53.3%	31.1%	4.4%	.0%	100.0%
Both Gos and NGOs	0	34	15	6	0	55
	.0%	61.8%	27.3%	10.9%	.0%	100.0%
Total	21	259	106	18	7	411
	5.1%	63.0%	25.8%	4.4%	1.7%	100.0%

Source: Field survey

In all the organizations, the highest number of IGAs produces food items. This is mainly because the women can make these items in their own houses. While 45.7% women of the NGOs produce food items, 35.7% from GOs and 32.7% from both GOs and NGOs do so. The second position is for stationery items. Here too, NGO women outnumber GO women (23.7% and 18.1% respectively). The least number produce soap and soap powder.

The major reasons for selecting such IGAs are easy manageability, organizational support, previous experience, and profitability. It is found that when a sizable number of GO members find their IGAs easy to manage, beneficiaries of NGOs get more organizational support (Table 5.5). With regard to previous experience and profitability, beneficiaries of NGOs have the edge over the others. Those who are beneficiaries of both NGOs and GOs also follow the same pattern.

355 (86.4%) women do not have any special skills as far as their IGAs are concerned. The reason is that they are mainly engaged in petty trade and other activities that don't require any special skills. At the same time, they say that though their units conduct training programmes for starting and continuing IGAs, they fail to attend such training programmes as such programmes are often conducted at far away places. A few

women (13.6%) have some sort of skills with reference to their IGAs (Table 5.6). These women say they got training from their respective groups. They are of the opinion that before starting any IGAs, they should have some knowledge about those activities, amount of investment, availability of raw materials, marketing the products and the rate of return. Thus participating actively in skill training programmes at any cost is very essential for starting and continuing their activities. There is no significant difference between members of GOs and NGOs with regard to their skills. Members of both GOs and NGOs are slightly ahead in the number having skills.

The respondents have different sources of information about the marketing of their products. 72.0% of them receive such information from their own organization. 10.2% do it on their own. 9.7% of them get it from their friends and relatives and 5.8% through market surveys. 83.6% of those who are members of both GOs and NGOs receive information through their organization; 77.8% members of NGOs and 65.6% members of GOs do so. A good number of the respondents (59.6%) resort to door-to-door selling. 14.8% have their own shops for selling their products. Others rely on distribution agencies, cooperative societies, and other channels for marketing.

As the respondents are mostly inexperienced and lack any formal training, they need considerable support from the organisations. It is seen that NGOs provide more support in most of the areas where the respondents need it. Financial support is given to a great extent by GOs and NGOs (87.8% and 93.3% respectively). GOs and NGOs perform alike in providing support for the marketing of products. Support by NGOs is more in areas like idea for the enterprise, suggestions on the products, technological advice, training on product and technology, training in marketing, packing and branding of the products, and follow up programmes.

2. Investment

Since the women are engaged in both individual and group ventures, investment is also done both individually and on group basis. Many of the respondents are of the opinion that individual activities are better than group activities. The reason cited is that, in an individual activity, the whole responsibility is entirely on the person herself. Then the risks as well as the benefits go to the person concerned only. They will be more aware of their responsibilities and try to make their activity a success. But in a group activity, there could be conflict among the members regarding the cost and the return which may lead to closure of their activities.

The amount of investment is an important factor, which determines the success and failure of any type of IGA. After joining these groups, women have been able to invest in those IGAs in which they are interested. Through bank linkage programmes of their groups, they can easily avail loans from the bank at reasonable rates of interest. They will also get subsidies. This will encourage more women to start IGAs. From table 5.10, it is found that the amount of investment ranges from less than Rs. 2500 to more than Rs. 50,000. A good number of the respondents are engaged in petty businesses which require low investment. 52.6% women have invested between Rs. 2500 and Rs.10,000; 14.1% between Rs.10,000 and Rs.50,000; and 5.4% more than Rs. 50000, since they are engaged in group activities. 43.6% of the respondents who are members of both GOs and NGOs and 31.2% from the GOs spend below Rs. 2500, whereas in the case of NGOs the number is only 16.3%.

The proportionate number of those who have invested more than Rs. 10,000 is more in the case of NGOs (22.2% against 10% of GOs and 10.9% of both GOs and NGOs). The number of group investors (above Rs 50,000) is also greater in the case of NGOs (8.9% against 4.1% of GOs and 1.8% of both GOs and NGOs).

The number of respondents having invested in group IGAs is low since they are not ready to take risks with regard to the bank loans that are availed for such IGAs.

3. Loans and Repayments

Majority of the respondents have joined the groups for loans and other financial benefits. Table 5.12 reveals that majority of the respondents have taken loans from their own kudumbasree units and SHGs (53.7% and 35.9% respectively). The rate of interest on the loan is 12%, which is comparatively low. But in other financial institutions like banks, cooperatives, and private moneylenders, the rate of interest is very high, which ranges from 14% to 60.

The loan amount depends upon the amount of thrift of each member. The number of members availing less than Rs 2000 as loan is more in the case of GOs (39.4%). It is 36% in the case of both GOs and NGOs and only 25.7% in the case of NGOs. In the Rs 2000 - Rs 4000 category, the number slightly increases for both GOs and NGOs (24%). GOs have 21.9% and NGOs, only 16.3%. In all the categories above Rs 4000, NGOs are ahead. In the above Rs 25000 category, NGOs have 5.9%, both GOs and NGOs 4%, and GOs, only 3%.

The loan amount with interest is repaid on weekly or monthly basis. Further allotment of the loan is based on the repayment nature of the respondent. So repayment is more or less prompt.

For all the organizations, more repayment is on monthly basis. The proportion is more or less the same for all of them. The number of monthly repayments is the highest in the case of members of both GOs and NGOs.

Strict monitoring reduces the cases of defaults. In the case of all the organizations, the highest number of defaulters fails to repay only twice or thrice. For the members of GOs, the terms are very strict; therefore, the number of defaulters in the higher number categories is almost none. NGOs act more liberally with defaulters. However, in their case too, the number is not significantly high. Those having IGAs find it easier to repay the loans.

4. Income

Before joining the SHG units, none of the beneficiaries had any form of IGAs and they had no earnings of their own. With the starting of IGAs, they have begun to earn. However, as most of them are engaged in petty trade and other low income earning activities, the amount of income is low. 50.4% earn only less than Rs 500 per month (Table 5.16). While 54.8% members of GOs earn so, the figure is 43.7% and 49.1% respectively in the case of NGOs and both GOs and NGOs. Members of NGOs outnumber those of GOs in the higher income categories. While 17.8% members of NGOs earn more than Rs 2000 per month, only 4.1% of those of GOs do so. In the case of both GOs and NGOs, it is only 1.8%. Though their earning is small, the beneficiaries are happy to say that something is better than nothing, as they are now able to contribute something towards their family income.

Table 2: Monthly Income of Beneficiaries

Category of organization	Monthly income					Total
	Up to Rs.500	Rs.501 - Rs.1000	Rs.1001 - Rs.1500	Rs.1501 - Rs.2000	Above Rs.2000	
GOs	121	24	52	15	9	221
	54.8%	10.9%	23.5%	6.8%	4.1%	100.0%
NGOs	59	6	37	9	24	135
	43.7%	4.4%	27.4%	6.7%	17.8%	100.0%
Both GOs and NGOs	27	12	12	3	1	55
	49.1%	21.8%	21.8%	5.5%	1.8%	100.0%
Total	207	42	101	27	34	411
	50.4%	10.2%	24.6%	6.6%	8.3%	100.0%

Source: Field survey

4.1 Income and Status in the Family

Majority of the respondents believe that their status in the family depends on their income at least to a limited extent. While 80.4% members of GOs feel that their status depends on their income to a limited extent, 88.1% of those of NGOs and 91% of those of both GOs and NGOs feel so. The number of those who say their status totally depends on their income is higher in the case of GOs (7.5% as against 3% each of those of NGOs and both GOs and NGOs).

4.2 Income and empowerment

Barring a negligible 0.4%, all the respondents feel that income generation is essential for their empowerment. In the case of all the organizations, a significant number says it is totally so (GOs - 21.6%, NGOs - 29.7%, Both GOs and NGOs - 22%).

5. Asset holding

The increase in the assets of the beneficiaries is measured in terms of land, livestock, and consumer durables acquired through support from the organisations or the income from IGAs.

5.1 Land

As far as land holdings are concerned, 25.3% of the respondents have only below five cents of land. Majority of them (43.6%) have five to ten cents of land. Only a few (3.0%) have more than 40 cents. It is seen that there is no impact on land holding. Nobody has purchased any land after starting joining the organization. The beneficiaries are of the opinion that since their income is utilised to meet their basic requirements, it is difficult for them to purchase any land. Sometimes they have to pawn their land for unforeseen purposes.

5.2 Livestock

It is seen that there is considerable increase in the number of livestock of the beneficiaries in all the organizations. However, the increase is more in the case of members of NGOs. While the number of cows increased from 54 to 84 in the case of GOs, the increase is from 33 to 69 in the case of NGOs. There is similar increase in the number of goats and poultry. This is mainly because a good number of beneficiaries have chosen cattle rearing and poultry farming as their IGAs.

5.3 Consumer durables

Consumer durables are generally considered as luxury items by the poor. It is found that there is increase in the number of household articles purchased by the beneficiaries after joining these groups. In the case of both GOs and NGOs, the increase is more in cooking aids like gas stove and mixer-grinder, and sewing machine. They have purchased all these items on installment basis.

6. Expenditure on food and Non- food items

There is notable increase in the expenditure on food items for members of all organisations. This increase is more in the case of members of NGOs. It is found that IGAs have made a tremendous change in the standard of living of the beneficiaries. Since members of NGO's are more engaged in IGAs, they perceive more change in this regard.

7. Savings and liabilities

Thrift/savings among the poor women show their economic upliftment. The beneficiaries are of the opinion that since they didn't have any source of income of their own, it was difficult to find any money to save before joining the groups.

After becoming members in these groups, the women have been able to make small savings either from their own income, or from that of any other member of the family. Since, it is compulsory, all the members have to save at least Rs.10 per week. Therefore, majority of the women can save a minimum of Rs. 480 annually. In certain Kudumbasree units and SHGs, the amount of thrift per week is Rs. 20. Some beneficiaries are

able to save more than this compulsory amount (Rs.1200 -Rs. 2400).

However, those who have dual membership, find it difficult to save through both the groups. A few beneficiaries are of the opinion that sometimes they find it difficult to save Rs.10 or 20 per week. These beneficiaries belong to the non-IGA category. At the same time, they know that if they save more, it is good for their future. As a result, there are no defaults.

The liability of the respondents mainly comes from the loans they have availed from and through the organizations. There is considerable decrease in the mean liability as the number of those having liability has gone up. While the number of liability holders has gone up from 143 to 208 in the case of GOs, it has shot up from 51 to 148 in the case of NGOs and from 15 to 64 in the case of both GOs and NGOs.

After joining the organisations, some of the respondents have gone for insurance policies. The number is the highest among members of both GOs and NGOs (49%), while among those of NGOs, it is 30.2% and for those of GOs, it is 19.3%. All the insurance holders have opted for LIC policies (Table).

The largest number of respondents has Rs 25000 as policy amount. However, in the case of NGOs, the largest number (45.9%) comes under Rs 50000 category (Table). GOs have 7.8% having Rs 100000 and 3.9% having Rs 200000 as policy amount, while NGOs have none in these categories.

Factors Determining Rural Women Empowerment

Based on the survey conducted among the beneficiaries, age of the beneficiaries, their family size, education, family education index, occupation of the husband, annual family income, and duration of participation in the NGOs/GOs have been taken as the variables to find out the factors determining women empowerment.

Age is considered as an important factor in empowerment. As a woman grows older, she gathers experience, which can equip her to assert herself. The size of the family also plays a significant role. As the size of the family decreases, the women find their burdens lighter. The level of education of the women and their families is usually taken as an important indicator of empowerment. The higher the level of education, the higher the level of empowerment. Occupation of the husbands and the annual family income also influence the level of empowerment. Finally, the period of participation in the organizations determines how far the women are empowered.

These factors have been tested through Multiple Linear Regression Analysis. This is used to model the value of a dependent scale variable based on its linear relationship to one or more predictors. The linear regression model assumes that there is a linear, or "straight line" relationship between the dependent variable and each predictor. This relationship is described in the following formula.

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_{i1} + \dots + \beta_p X_{ip} + e_i$$

where,

Y_i is the value of the i th case of the dependent scale variable

p is the number of predictors

β_j is the value of the j th coefficient, $j=0, \dots, p$

X_{ij} is the value of the i th case of the j th predictor

e_i is the error in the observed value for the i th case

The model is linear because increasing the value of the j th predictor by one unit increases the value of the dependent by β_j units. Note that β_0 is the intercept, the model-predicted value of the dependent variable, when the value of every predictor is equal to 0. For the purpose of testing hypotheses about the values of model parameters, the linear regression model also assumes the following:

- o The error term has a normal distribution with a mean of 0.
- o The variance of the error term is constant across cases and independent of the variables in the model. An error term with non-constant variance is said to be heteroscedastic.
- o The value of the error term for a given case is independent of the values of the variables in the model and of the values of the error term for other cases.

The linear model with Empowerment Index as the Dependent Variable (DV) and following Independent (explanatory) variables (IV) can be specified as:

$$EM = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \beta_4 X_4 + \beta_5 X_5 + \beta_6 X_6 + \beta_7 X_7 + e$$

EM = Empowerment Index

X_1 = Age of the respondent

X_2 = Family size

X_3 = Education of the respondent

X_4 = Family Education Index

X_5 = Occupation of husband

X_6 = Annual Family Income

X_7 = Duration of participation at the NGOs/GOs

e = Error term

The model is found to be reasonably fit as indicated by the value of adjusted R Square, the coefficient of determination (.418). The ANOVA table which tests the acceptability of the model from a statistical perspective, reports that the F test is statistically significant ($p=.00$). The significance value of the F statistic is less than 0.05, which means that the variation explained by the model is not due to chance. The regression coefficient values are explained in the following table.

Table 3: Regression Coefficient

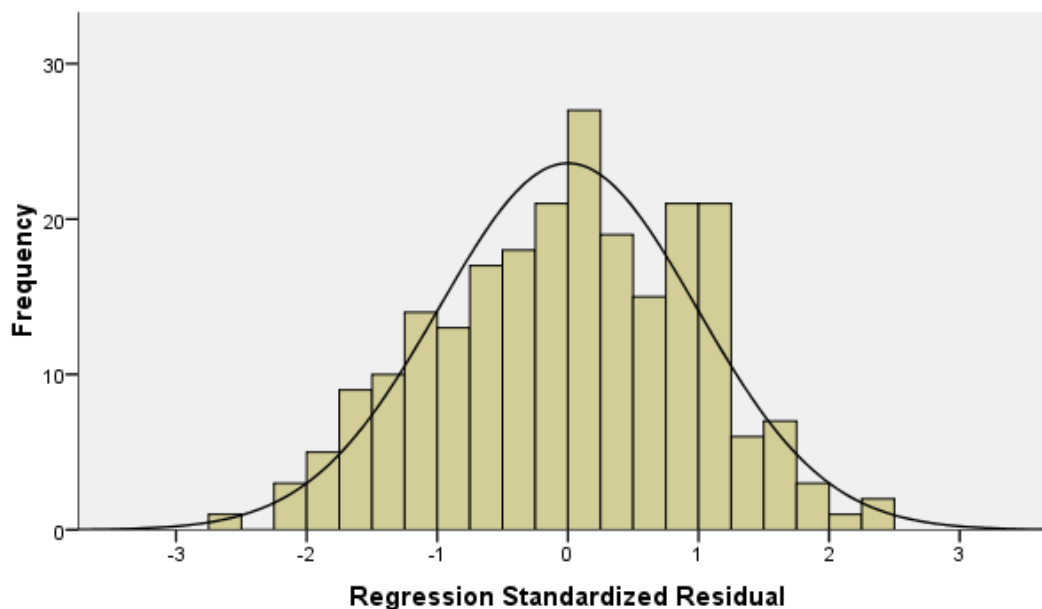
Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	.359	.045		7.97	.000		
Age of beneficiary	.000	.001	-.044	-1.01	.314	.639	1.56
Family size	.017	.006	.104	2.86	.004	.908	1.10
Education of the respondent	.001	.002	.031	.675	.500	.580	1.72
Family education index	-.003	.002	-.050	-1.19	.234	.691	1.45
Occupation of husband	-.025	.018	-.050	-1.38	.168	.907	1.10
Annual family income	.000	.000	.228	5.88	.000	.795	1.26
Duration of participation in NGO/GO	.019	.002	.316	8.92	.000	.949	1.05

Regression analysis result shows that only three variables - family size, annual family income, and duration of participation in NGOs/GOs - have significant influence on the dependent variable. Again, it may be noted that the coefficient values of the significant variables are small; for annual family income the value is zero.

To determine the relative importance of the significant predictors, we have to consider the standardized coefficients. Duration of participation in NGO/GO is found to have the highest value. Even though it has a smaller coefficient compared to family size, annual family income actually contributes more to the model because it has a larger absolute standardized coefficient.

As per the study, age of the beneficiaries, their education, family education index, and the occupation of the husbands are found to have no significant influence in empowering rural women. As economic upliftment is vital in rural women empowerment, means to generate more income assumes significance. The largest number of the beneficiaries is found in the middle-age group. It is a time when the women are more in need of supporting income for their families. Otherwise, age does not have any significance in their empowerment. Most of the beneficiaries are engaged in petty business and micro enterprises. Higher level of education is not a requirement for such activities. Majority of the beneficiaries have education below SSLC. The husbands of the beneficiaries do not have occupations good enough to support the families completely. Therefore, their occupations do not help the empowerment of their women.

The last column in the Coefficient table is Collinearity Statistics. The presence of multicollinearity has been examined by Tolerance Ratio and by Variance Inflation Factor (VIF). Both of them assure that the presence of multicollinearity is within safe limits.

Fig.1: Histogram of Residuals**Dependent Variable: EM**

Histogram of the residuals has been used to check the assumption of normality of the error term (Fig) The shape of the histogram approximately follows the shape of the normal curve ensuring the normality of the error term.

Conclusion

The economic impact has been analysed based on employment generation, investment, income, assets, savings and liabilities of the beneficiaries. More than half of the respondents with IGAs started these merely to have some additional income; others have the dream of saving something for the future also. Most of the women are engaged in petty businesses. Such women are more in number in the case of GOs. However, the number of those engaged in agricultural activities and cattle rearing/poultry farming is more in the case of NGOs. Since the women are engaged in both individual and group ventures, investment is also done both individually and on group basis. The amount of investment ranges from below Rs.2500 to above Rs.50,000. The investment is low for the majority, while more of those in the NGOs invest higher amounts. Majority of the respondents have availed loans from their own Kudumbasree units and SHGs as the rate of interest is comparatively low. Repayment, usually on weekly or monthly basis, is more or less prompt as further allotment depends on this. Apart from investing in IGAs, most of the women spend a portion of loan for household purposes also. Half of those who have IGAs earn only less than Rs 500 per month. Members of NGOs outnumber those of GOs in the higher income categories. There is significant difference between gross annual family income before and after joining the organizations. The respondents generally feel that income generation is essential for their empowerment. The number of livestock and household articles has gone up. The increase is more in the case of members of NGOs. The women have been able to make small savings either from their own income or from that of any other member of the family. However, there is no increase in the area of land held by the beneficiaries.

Based on the indices identified by different researchers, this study has identified four indices to measure empowerment: personal development index, domestic consultation index, mobility index, and political/social involvement index. The empowerment index calculated shows the highest mean value for the NGOs, followed by both GOs and NGOs. The Post Hoc Tests do not show any homogeneous subsets of mean values of the Empowerment Index. This result shows that GOs and NGOs have separate identities in their programmes and modes of implementation.

Seven independent variables - age of the beneficiaries, family size, education of the beneficiaries, family education index, occupation of the husbands, annual family income, and duration of participation in the GOs/NGOs - have been chosen to identify the factors determining rural women empowerment. The Multiple Linear Regression analysis has identified family size, annual family income, and duration of participation in the organization as the key factors contributing towards empowerment. The other factors do not have any direct bearing on their empowerment.

However, at present, they are only in the initial stages of empowerment. They are struggling for economic independence. They have to move on to economic sufficiency, stability, and sustained growth. There has been considerable improvement in the role and status of the women in their families. There has also been positive change in their personal and social relationships.

The programmes of all the organizations, particularly those of the Kudumbasree Mission, are well implemented. However, they have not yet attained the desired goals. Proper monitoring, evaluation, assessment, and corrective measures are required for the effectiveness of the programmes. Most of the women join the organisations merely for temporary financial benefits. This tendency reduces the role of the organisations to mere spoon-feeding. The organisations should encourage their members to channelise the money towards income generating activities which will put them in good stead in future.

End Notes and References

1. Christa Wichterich (1995) "Empowerment for women? The gap between Theory and Practice", Development and Co-operation, No (4), p.11.
2. Alappuzha, Kottayam and Pathanamthitta districts are the three major districts of Kerala, where the the selected governmental and non-governmental organizations are very active and fully engaged in the process of rural women empowerment through their micro financing programmes.
3. The Kerala government on 17th May 1988, initiated "the State Poverty Eradication Mission" popularly known as Kudumbasree, meaning 'prosperity of the family' and is entirely meant for poor rural and urban women.
4. The Changanassery Social Service Society is an initiative of the Archdiocese of Changanassery, a leading NGO, established in the year 1966.A just society based on human values, sustainable development of the poor and marginalized through community organization, awareness and training are the vision and mission of this society.
5. World Vision of India is also a leading Christian relief and developmental organization dedicated to helping children and their communities worldwide reach their full potential by tackling the causes of poverty.It is also a leading NGO in Central Kerala which is actively engaged in process of the upliftment of the rural folk.