



## Social Work Field Practicum in Government-Initiated Projects

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**ABSTRACT:** Voluntary Executives of Kudumbashree (VEK) is an innovative concurrent fieldwork program introduced in Kerala in 2004 to provide opportunities for social work students to work with the State Poverty Eradication Mission (Kudumbashree), where social work students get exposed to the prestigious governmental initiatives for poverty eradication. The program has provided students with the knowledge and skills to work with government systems to reduce poverty. Since social work student trainees work in the field with formal approval and backing from the government, they can quickly establish connections with community power structures and become actively involved in the work of grassroots-level women's organizations. By accomplishing the various tasks assigned by the Kudumbashree mission, the student trainees have acquired competence in social work's micro and macro methods. The findings highlight advances in the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of students who worked with Kudumbashree Mission.

**Keywords:** voluntary executives of kudumbashree (VEK), community development, kudumbashree, social work, poverty eradication



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The distinctiveness of social work education stems from the proper integration of classroom learning with learning from actual practice fields. The classroom provides students with theoretical knowledge of social work methods, whereas fieldwork training provides students with actual experiential learning in real-life situations. The fieldwork or social work practicum is critical because it provides a rich experiential foundation for the student's academic learning. According to the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) guidelines for assessing Schools of social work for accreditation, the social work practicum should ideally constitute 50% of full academic training (NAAC, 2003). A fair standard is one-third of total training, that is a minimum of 30 days per semester (90 days) for fieldwork practice. The social work practicum allows students to develop professional skills through action reflection in real-life situations. The Voluntary Executives of Kudumbashree (VEK) is an innovative concurrent fieldwork program launched in Kerala in 2004 to provide opportunities for social work students to work with the State Poverty Eradication Mission, where social work students work with prestigious governmental initiatives for poverty eradication.

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## **Methods and Material**

### ***Kudumbashree Mission***

The Kerala Government's State Poverty Eradication Mission, popularly known as Kudumbashree (implied meaning "family prosperity"), was established in 1998 to eliminate absolute poverty through collective action by community-based organizations. Kudumbashree uses a process approach to eradicate absolute poverty from the state by incorporating holistic, participatory, and women-centred strategies. Local Self Governments carry this process forward, empowered by the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments (Kudumbashree, 2013).

The Kudumbashree community organization system currently supports 35.24 lakh families (roughly half of all families in the state) through 2.94 lakhs Neighborhood Groups (NHG). The NHG are federated into Area Development Societies (ADS) at the ward (subunit of local government) level, covering 95 percent of the state's local government wards. Community Development Societies (CDS) registered at the Local Government level serve as the three-tier system's apex-level federation. Kerala has 1064 CDS, which cover the state's 978 Gram Panchayats (rural) and 65 Municipalities (urban) (Kudumbashree, 2013).

'Kudumbashree' envisions the prosperity of low-income families in the state through a variety of programs that provide them with information, raise awareness, build their capability, boost their confidence, and show them opportunities for better social security, as well as liberate them physically, socially, economically, and politically. Kudumbashree's activities focus on institution development and capacity building, local economic development, social development, and the development of women and children. What distinguishes Kudumbashree from similar poverty alleviation initiatives in other states is the collaboration of Kerala's community organization network with local government (Panchayati Raj) institutions (PRI). The convergence allows Kudumbashree to focus more physical and financial resources on targeted interventions for low-income families. It also allows women to develop their leadership skills and advance to positions of responsibility and power in local governments (Kudumbashree, 2013).

### ***The partnership between Kudumbashree and Educational institutions***

Kudumbashree has partnered with social work educational institutions in the state to utilize the services of social work students in broadening the mission's activities in Panchayats and Municipal areas. The program began in 2004, and the MSW students from Rajagiri College of Social Sciences were appointed as Voluntary Executives of Kudumbashree (VEK) after undergoing training in various aspects of the Kudumbashree Mission's programs (The Hindu, 2005).

In 2004, the District Kudumbashree Mission, Ernakulam (DKME), signed a formal agreement with Rajagiri College of Social Sciences (RCSS) to use the services of Social Work students to expand the mission's activities. The Agreement has authorized RCSS social work students to work as Voluntary Executives of Kudumbashree (VEK) in the assigned Panchayats to raise awareness about Kudumbashree's programs, facilitate the process, and monitor and implement various projects. Specific targets are assigned to students regularly based on the needs of the Kudumbashree Mission. In the early years, some objectives assigned to students included increasing thrift and loan in NHGs, starting new micro-enterprises for women, forming Balasabas (children's associations), and working as resource persons in village programs for women empowerment (Kudumbashree-RCSS, 2004).

Observational Visits to social work agencies, social sensitization camp, concurrent social work practicum, block placement, summer placement, study tour, organization of annual conferences/seminar, field surveys and action research projects are the traditional methods used to provide fieldwork training for social work students (Subhedar, 2001). In general, most social work schools place students in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and extension projects of their respective schools of social work to provide field training.

The VEK program is unique in that students are placed with a governmental agency (Kudumbashree) for concurrent fieldwork, with the agency providing necessary training to the students before the fieldwork at the expense of the Kudumbashree Mission (RCSS, 2009). The mission assigns the students as VEKs (without remuneration), allowing them to work under the mission as Voluntary Executives alongside officials and local leaders of women's groups.

The MSW course's community fieldwork accommodates students working with the Poverty Alleviation Mission. Because of the program's success, most of Kerala's social work schools have formed formal partnerships with the Kudumbashree Mission. Fieldwork by social work students supports the mission's grassroots level activities, such as the formation and strengthening of Neighborhood groups and enabling women living with poverty to start various income-generating projects for their economic development. These volunteer executives have specific goals such as increasing thrift collection, extending lease land farming, and establishing bank connections.

The Kudumbashree fieldwork program is still in place, and most MSW students from Kerala's social work schools get trained through the Kudumbashree Mission. The program has assisted many students in obtaining employment as social consultants with the Kudumbashree Mission.

The Kudumbashree Mission has entrusted some specific tasks to the student workers, including scaling up the Ashraya project for needy families, particularly in the tribal villages of the district, assisting local governments in identifying mentally challenged students and starting special schools in the villages, and strengthening children's organizations (Balasabha) in the villages. An empirical analysis of the students' fieldwork as VEKs in 2019-20 to understand the effectiveness of the ongoing fieldwork with the Kudumbashree Mission.

### **Research Methodology**

The study design is a quantitative survey, with data drawn from primary and secondary sources. The primary data was collected from first-year MSW students assigned to the District Kudumbashree Mission in Ernakulam. The sample comprises 31 students who completed fieldwork in ten local Panchayats as part of the Kudumbashree Mission in 2019-20, using simple random sampling for sample selection. Books, reports, and internet-based information were among the secondary sources.

The researcher designed an arbitrary seven-point rating scale to assess MSW students' knowledge, skills, and attitude in fieldwork with the Kudumbashree Mission of Kerala (Kothari, 2004). The research tool was a two-part questionnaire. The first section is an arbitrary scale with 27 items (13 items on knowledge, nine on skills and five on attitude concerning the fieldwork objectives of the MSW program). The second section includes open-ended questions about completing fieldwork objectives and students' accomplishments in the context of their fieldwork with Kudumbashree Mission.

The student's knowledge, skills, and attitude level are measured before and after the fieldwork to assess the change. The scale has the required reliability and validity (Cronbach's Alpha 0.966 and 0.913 for the arbitrary scales used: pre and post). Because the data collected does not violate the assumptions of normal distribution, we did paired sample t-tests to compare students' knowledge, skills, and attitudes before and after the fieldwork.

### Results and Discussion

The student's awareness/knowledge about the significant components of the Kudumbashree, namely the structure and functioning of the organization, the microfinance programs, income generation enterprises undertaken by women, and the programs for children and needy families (Ashraya program), are assessed before and after the fieldwork. The results show (Figure 1 & Table 1) positive changes in the student's level of knowledge about all of the programs.

#### **Knowledge, Skills and Attitude in the Fieldwork under Kudumbashree**

Category	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t- value (p-value)
Knowledge Before the Fieldwork	31	4.00	52.00	18.26	13.147	2.361	
Knowledge after the Fieldwork	31	42.00	72.00	56.58	7.269	1.306	-15.602 (.000)*
Skills Before the Fieldwork	31	0.00	37.00	17.68	10.176	1.827	-13.028 (.000)*
Skills after the Fieldwork	31	28.00	51.00	39.29	5.274	.947	
Attitude Before the Fieldwork	31	1.00	22.00	11.71	5.429	.975	-12.773 (.000)*
Attitude after the Fieldwork	31	13.00	30.00	23.45	3.767	.676	
Composite Score Before the Fieldwork	31	11.00	109.00	47.64	25.797	4.633	-15.636 (.000)*
Composite Score after the Fieldwork	31	91.00	148.00	119.32	13.693	2.459	
*1% level of significance							

Table 1 shows a significant difference in the average level of knowledge among students before and after the fieldwork with the Kudumbashree mission (t value = -15.602, p-value<0.01 at 1% level of significance). The mean score on knowledge before the fieldwork was 18.26 (S.D 13.147), and after the fieldwork, training was 56.58 (S.D 7.269). The fieldwork created better knowledge of the poverty reduction program among the social work students.

The essential skills required for community practice are enhancing communication skills, interaction, organizing community programs, mobilizing resources and organization of people, and analyzing problems/situations. The fieldwork is often considered the avenue to develop the skills for community practice.

Table 1 shows a significant difference in the average level of skills among social work

students before and after the fieldwork training (t-value=-13.028, p-value<0.01 at 1% level of significance). The mean score on community practice skills before the fieldwork was 17.68 (S.D 10.176), and after the fieldwork training was found to be 39.29 (S.D 5.274). The fieldwork has helped to pick up the necessary skills for community practice.

Forming a pro-people attitude with the acquisition of fundamental values of social work is critical for developing a sound professional practice in social work. From *Figure 1 & Table 1*, a significant difference in the student's attitude before and after the fieldwork training with the kudumbashree mission (t-value= -12.773, p-value<0.01 at a 1% significance level) was observed. The mean score on social work attitude before the fieldwork was 11.71 (S.D 5.429), and after the fieldwork training, it was found to be 23.45(S.D 3.767). The fieldwork has helped develop a positive attitude among the social work students.

*Table 1* - the composite score shows a significant difference in the knowledge, skills and attitude among social work students before and after the fieldwork with Kudumbashree Mission (t-value= -15.636, p-value<0.01 at 1% level of significance). The composite mean score before the fieldwork was 47.64 (S.D 25.797), and after the training was 119.32(S.D 13.693). The program was found to be effective in improving the knowledge and skills of social work students and forming a positive social work attitude among the students.

### **Completion of Fieldwork Objectives under Kudumbashree**

No.	Status of the completion of activities	Frequency	Percent
1	A detailed family survey in the tribal colony of Kuttampuzha (on average, 50-70 families by each student)	31	100.00
2	Participation in f Ashraya project (survey, report, screening of the family /verification /documentation for needy families)	31	100.00
3	Strengthening of balasabha (association of children under kudumbashree) – motivational classes/group activities/games for children	19	61.29
4	Identification of mentally challenged children in the villages to link them with the Buds school (school for mentally challenged)	14	45.16
5	Initiatives to form micro-enterprise for parents of Buds school	3	9.67

The students are asked about the status regarding completing assignments given by the Kudumbashree mission during the fieldwork placement. *Table 2* observes that all the students (100%) have completed the family survey in the tribal village of Kuttampuzha in the Ernakulam district. On average, 50-70 tribal households are visited by each student and conduct the family survey to identify the most vulnerable families among the tribal communities. The students stayed in the village for three days under the supervision of the officials of Kudumabshree and completed the assignments.

During their concurrent fieldwork (two days a week for about 20 days), all the students (100%) participated in the Ashraya project survey conducted in the respective Panchayats to identify needy families. The students have done the required resurvey, screening the family /verification and documentation for needy families. The work has helped the District Mission speed up the delivery of services for needy families.

About 19 students (61.29 %) have associated with the Balasabha (children's association in the villages) and helped scale up children's clubs' activities. The students could practice social

casework and social group work by working with children in the villages through Balasabha. The Balasabha program was not very active in tribal villages since most of the students were in the metric hostels, so the MSW students placed in tribal villages could not take up the objective of strengthening the Balasabha in the respective villages.

BUDS schools are educational services started in the villages under the initiatives of Kudumbashree for mentally challenged children. About 14 students (45.16%) have associated with the BUDS Schools functioning in the respective villages. They have also identified and linked a few mentally challenged children with the school. One group of students has initiated a micro-enterprise program for the parents of mentally challenged children so that the parents may generate additional income.

### **Significant achievements from the VEK Program**

No.	Item	Frequency	Percent
1	Exposure to Tribal communities and their specific problems	28	90.32
2	Exposure to the governmental program of poverty alleviation	26	83.87
3	Improved self-confidence by working with different types of people	23	74.19
4	Improvement in the skills of working with children under Balasabha	18	58.06
5	Easy access to Local Self-government systems under VEK program	15	48.39
6	Understanding of the micro-level organizations and their works	14	45.16
7	Improvements in skills of communication & interaction	13	41.94
8	Firsthand experience of the real-life situation of the poor	12	38.71
9	Exposure to an open community	11	35.48
10	Experience of political overtones in communities (power structure)	10	32.26
11	Perception of Role/duties of social worker in community practices	9	29.03
12	Knowledge of documentation/reporting with the govt. system	9	29.03
13	The practice of the principles of social work	7	22.58
14	Positive change in the attitude toward the people	7	22.58

On queries regarding the significant achievements from the Program of Voluntary Executives of Kudumbashree (VEK) fieldwork training, for 90.32 %, it was excellent exposure to tribal communities, and they could experience the specific problems faced by the tribal communities in Kerala. The majority of the students (83.87%) have expressed that the VEK program helped them get a clear understanding of governmental programs for poverty alleviation. About 48.39 % believe that the program has provided easy access for them to local self-government activities. They could easily interact with governmental officials of various departments related to welfare and governance since the students are placed in the panchayat as voluntary executives of the Kudumbashree mission. The official assignments have helped easy interaction and access to government programs and projects.

Regarding personal benefits, the majority (74.19%) have claimed that they have improved their self-confidence, and a good number (58.06%) could improve their skills in working with children. They have conducted motivational classes, group games and theatre workshops for children in the Balasabha meetings.

The other benefits of the program perceived by 30-45 % of the students are that they could understand various micro-level organizations, improve their skills of communication & interaction, receive firsthand experience of real-life situations of people experiencing poverty,

exposure to an open community and experience the political overtones in local communities (power structure).

About 20-30 % of the students have opined that they have greatly benefited from the program by perceiving the roles/duties of the social worker in community practices and acquiring knowledge of documentation/reporting with the government. The system is practicing social work principles and inculcating a positive change in their attitude towards the community.

### Conclusion

The results have shown pronounced changes in the knowledge, skills and attitude of the students who have worked with Kudumbashree Mission. The program has enabled the students to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills for working with governmental systems in poverty reduction. Since the social work student workers are sent to the field with formal approval and backup from the governmental agency, they could quickly establish linkages with the community power structures and be actively involved in the working of the grassroots level organizations of women. The student workers could easily practice and acquire competence in the micro and macro methods of social work by fulfilling the various tasks assigned by the *kudumbashree* mission.

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