



From Invisibility to Visibility: Experiences of Women in Kerala's High-range Areas

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ABSTRACT: This research article examines women's experiences residing in the high-range areas of the Idukki district in Kerala, focusing on their transition from invisibility to visibility. The study was conducted among women in these regions, identifying five key informants. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, revealing a progressive change in rural women's socio-economic, political, and familial spheres over the past decade. The findings indicate that these women have become more visible in various domains of society. Financial independence has significantly enhanced their self-worth, critical in contexts with skewed gender equality. Government initiatives, such as women-specific programs and social legislation, have positively impacted women's empowerment by providing financial security. This paper identifies the underlying factors contributing to the increased visibility of rural women in political, economic, social, and cultural spheres and the gradual development of their self-worth. Additionally, it discusses the role of social work in further empowering women's visibility.

Keywords: high-range women, economic visibility, social visibility, political visibility, collective empowerment, self-visibility, rural social work



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Despite women's significant contributions, much of their labour remains unpaid and unrecognized, relegating them to invisibility in national development efforts. This phenomenon, termed "invisible work" by sociologist Arlene Daniels, refers to unpaid labour that goes unnoticed and unregulated, particularly prevalent in agriculture and household activities. While most of the country's systems fail to quantify women's work inputs, particularly in agriculture and household activities, this paper argues that this invisibility of women's labour contributes significantly to their economic and social marginalization. The study aims to depict the experiences of high-range women in the Idukki district, Kerala, over the past decade, highlighting their journey from invisibility to visibility. By examining factors that have influenced this transition and the impact on their socio-economic status, this paper seeks to underscore the importance of recognizing and valuing women's contributions in rural areas.

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Rural women are often engaged solely in domestic duties, either entirely outside of the labour force or engaged in it marginally. These trends are noted despite significant improvements in women's education levels, which continue to lag behind men's, and in the context of strong economic growth. This is perhaps a reflection of social norms, which often dictate gender roles and restrict women to household and reproductive activities (ILO, 2017). For a time, women were invisible not only in the economic sphere but also in the political, social, and cultural spheres. However, recently, the status and position of women have progressively changed a lot.

Unlike other districts in Kerala, Idukki and Wayanad are densely forested and geographically known for their Mountainous Hills. Due to its geographical roughness, the life of the people here is also rough. Most families in Idukki migrated from the densely populated areas of Kerala in the 1920s to do agriculture. The people of Idukki have a history of wrestling with harsh climates and wildlife, so they have geographic resilience. From the early ecology-based 'bounce back' perspective, the roughness induced by the ecological system in terms of natural hazards or topographical unevenness may provide a 'capacity' and 'capability' to bounce back to physical and psychological barriers (Manyena et al., 2011).

The lack of better opportunities, transport facilities, and drinking water seriously affected women's lives here more than men's. The women here have had a hard time, especially making a living. The role of women in building a life and the economy was almost invisible. However, over the past decade, women's appearance in the mainstream of society has marked the beginning of a new era.

Research Methodology

The researcher identified five key informants who reside in rural high-ranges of the Idukki district and conducted in-depth interviews based on the interview schedule. In the qualitative analysis, as part of familiarizing with the data, the researcher translated the data to English from the native Malayalam and read and re-read textual data. Semantic coding was done, and the identified codes were converted to themes. The thematic analysis concluded with five themes: economic visibility, self-visibility, social visibility, political visibility, and visibility in the family.

Economic Visibility

Unpaid labour causes women to be invisible in all the life phases they mainly perform. Regrettably, tasks performed by women for household and children's welfare are never recognized as economic activities; instead, the dependent population, particularly children and older individuals, rely on women's capabilities for survival. Generally, our economic and social systems

evaluate the person as earning based on the regularly paid money. Here, women fail against men in terms of calculating their invisible labour as economic activity. Though women have contributed to economic productivity since the dawn of human history, their role has been visualized as passive.

In high-range, women's labour is closely related to agricultural activities and animal husbandry, where women's contribution merges with that of the collective family roles and becomes invisible. The changes in the status of women started with the introduction of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) 2005, where women were legally required to have bank accounts. Through this scheme, they have formed different groups to engage in Joint Liability Group (JLG) activities and other income-creating deeds. Besides that, Local Self Governments (LSGs), Kudumbasree, NGOs, and religious institutions promoted the concept of economic independence among women. One of the informants says,

Generally speaking, I used to come outside the home after the introduction of MGNREGA
(2)

A study by the Rajiv Gandhi Institute for Contemporary Studies found that MGNREGA has brought many women (almost three times more) who would not have otherwise worked out of their homes and employed them. Another respondent added that MGNREGA helped them get engaged in other activities.

After that, we have formed a group to engage in other agriculture-related activities. Our SHGs also got motivated (1)

Many female respondents said the work provided under the MGNREGA opened up a new opportunity for them. It gives them the opportunities to interact with new people and government authorities (Joseph, 2017)

Specific to the Idukki district, 75% of MGNREGA workers are women through a hundred days of assured labour in a panchayat, approximately four crores reaching the hands of women. A significant part of this amount is revolving in the community through self-help groups (SHGs). At present, each Self-Help Group (SHG) can lend two lakhs to its members, and they also hold an investment of 10 lakh rupees in the bank, accumulated through thrift over the last fifteen years.

SHGs are a tremendous economic source for women to enable the distribution and exchange of money. Local markets reflect this financial independence. Merchants and retailers also agreed that women's purchasing capacity has doubled recently. Children are the safest group to

enjoy the benefits of economic independence of women because they spend the utmost of their money on children's food and educational needs.

I have become economically independent through MGNREGA, and I am confident I can spend some money on my part in emergencies. Hence, I can now support my life partner.

(3)

I have many deposits in SHG, and SHG can give two lakhs as a loan per person. I am confident about taking a loan because I can repay it weekly. (5)

Joseph (2017), in his study, highlighted that the majority (86%) of the women workers became economically independent after joining the program. Previously, only 10% of the members were economically independent. These findings demonstrate that participation in MGNREGA significantly improved their situation. Pankaj and Tankha (2010), in their article 'Empowerment Effects of the NREGS on Women Workers: Analysis concluded that women have gained more opportunities because of cash payment in hand through the scheme; as a result, they have benefitted through income consumption effects, intra-household effects, and the enhancement of choice and capability than before. We can see from the following response that age is not a barrier to economic empowerment.

I am 60 years old, and I have an ATM card. Now, I can withdraw cash from my account without any assistance. My most happiness is getting things for my grandchildren with my money. (1)

The saving habit of women is mostly reflected in gold purchasing. Women are willing to invest money in gold because it is helpful in emergencies. In addition, there is a growing tendency among women to pay small sums of money with chits and use them for significant needs. An informant says about her saving habit,

These days, I am using the money I have saved to buy gold. Also, family members go for an outing once in a while. (4)

When economic visibility exists, women's presence will naturally begin to be visible in all spheres of life, especially in the personal, social, and political domains.

Self- Visibility

Since the feeling of self-worth is closely tied to an individual's roles as a worker and provider, losing these roles often results in the loss of self-esteem (Keefe, 1984). The participants doubtlessly say they are more concerned about self, self-worth, and dignity. The development of "self" in women helped them eliminate the false consciousness induced by culture and patriarchal

society. The term self-worth can be read in association with the concept of empowerment. Moser (1989: 1815) defines empowerment as:

"The capacity of women to increase their self-reliance and internal strength. This is identified as the right to determine choices in life and to influence the direction of change through the ability to gain control over material and non-material resources."

Here, the definition points out that empowerment concentrates on personal strength and self-esteem to gain control over available resources and to exercise their right to obtain the quality of life for themselves and their family. In other words, personal empowerment involves positive changes to an individual's psychological constructs, such as collective efficacy, self-efficacy, self-esteem, and a proactive attitude (Lord, 1991). When the researcher asked about domestic violence, one of the respondents explained that:

Whenever someone tries to insult my personality with words or other actions, I will respond immediately. Because I know justice must be done to myself or my identity. This attitude came to me from seeing the lives of others and in discussions with my workmates.

(3)

The wondering fact is that now, most women are not at all ready to tolerate violence, even from family members. A person becomes aware of his identity and dignity when she/he realizes that his rights are being violated or abused. The cases filed against domestic violence in different first-class magistrate courts and Grama Nyayalayas in the Idukki district are higher than those received last year. This statistic does not mean that violence against women is on the rise, but it also means that women are ready to respond to violence. Women have begun to abandon the practice of burring violence in silence, and the Times of India reported that in the last six months, 287 divorce cases from the Kattappana Family Court and 145 cases from the Thodupuzha court have been recorded. The Kattappana family court, which covers the high-range plantation area, gets almost 10 cases daily, per the report. Thanks to legal literacy campaigns, social activists, social work institutions, government initiatives towards gender sensitization programs for all levels of administration, and the law enforcing machinery strengthening of existing legislation regarding violence against women, they have more confidence to register complaints against the atrocities meted out towards them by the family members. The Protection of Women Against Domestic Violence Act 2005 provides a sense of security to women.

Many women have experienced the group as one of the few places where they can form trusting relationships, feel accepted, and begin to deal with unresolved problems. Once they feel validated for their struggles, their self-esteem increases quickly, albeit in small increments. Women's groups have various components like mutual support, assertiveness, talking, consciousness-raising, and stress management (Bernardez, 1983).

Similar to self-worth with beliefs concerning the ability to exercise control over self-functioning behaviours, a proactive attitude, according to Schwarzer (1999), is a personality characteristic that has implications for motivation and action. It focuses on the belief that individuals can positively change themselves and their environment through resources, responsibility, and values. One of the informers said,

I am satisfied with myself because what I am doing now is what I feel is right. I do not have to live with my mind deceived. As my thoughts change, little changes are also visible among family members (5)

Social Visibility

As mentioned earlier, the primary step for women to appear in the social space is to be visible financially and personally. In Kerala, Kudumbasree (Kudumbashree is the poverty eradication and women empowerment program implemented by the State Poverty Eradication Mission (SPEM) of the Government of Kerala. The name Kudumbashree in Malayalam means 'prosperity of the family') and acts as a platform for social visibility. Indeed, women are making good use of the organizational platforms in Kudumbashree, such as ADS (Area Development Service), CDS (Community Development Service), and SHGs (Self-Help Groups). Participation leads to gaining leadership skills and a community service mentality. One of the respondents replied that:

Now, women constitute ¾ % of participation in grama sabha meetings. Kudumbasree, ADS (Area Development Societies), and CDS (Community Development Societies) are good platforms for women to engage in public activities. (2)

Gurumoorthy (2000) reveals that empowering women contributes to social development. The self-help group disburses micro-credit to rural women to make them enterprising and encourage them to engage in entrepreneurial activities. The credit needs of rural women are fulfilled through self-help groups. SHGs enhance the equality of status of women as participants, decision-makers, and beneficiaries in the democratic economic, social, and cultural spheres of life. SHGs also encourage women to participate actively in our nation's socio-economic progress.

The reply of one of the respondents is supported these findings as:

It was only after joining the SHG that I came to an understanding of financial transactions. More than that, the confidence I get when everyone stands together makes me strong enough to do many new things without fear. (4)

Another informant commented that

Now I can speak up before the audience without any stage fear because SHG is a big platform for me to speak before the small group (2)

Ragavan (2009), in his article, stated that the poor women of the State had become active participants in the planning and implementation process of various anti-poverty programs. By participating in various income-generating –cum-developmental activities, the morale and confidence of women became very high.

Political Visibility

The strong presence of women in the High Range over the past ten years is evident in the political arena. There are several different reasons and factors behind the solid political presence of women, which are interconnected. The women in the position of MGNREGA workmate gradually step into the activities of ADS and CDS as well. During this period, they develop leadership skills, go to the grassroots level, work with the people, and become familiar with them. In Kerala, 50 percent of reservations in the local self-government system are allocated to women, enabling experienced individuals to contest and win elections frequently. One of the respondents added that:

Women active in ADS and CDS are easily getting elected to local self-governments for governance. 50% reservation on LSG is very beneficial for women. (4)

The presence and ability of women in the three-tier panchayat administrations are highly appreciable. In some places, political parties can only carry out their political activities with the presence and participation of women. One informant opined that:

Political parties depend highly on women to succeed in political campaigns and programs through active participation. (3)

As more and more women are in local administration, these regimes have become places where women can approach their needs. Despite the criticism that women elected to local self-governments become the pawns of men, women can now function independently on time.

Women have already proved that political activities and civic sense suit them to serve the public. (5)

The above respondent thoroughly affirms that women are more suitable to act in politics.

Visibility in Family

Families were also willing to acknowledge the presence of women in the economic, political, and social spheres. For middle-class families, it was a matter of pride for the whole family if women went out for days' wages labour. This category was identified as the most vulnerable group to find the cost of living for everyday life. The family depended on the income of the head of the family for its livelihood. However, MGNREGA broke the shackles of this malice, and women began to come out to generate income. With the participation of women in contributing to family expenses, their voices and presence became relevant within the family. Women were involved in making important decisions regarding family and children. Women with a low economic status would benefit socially and psychologically from economic strength (Moyle et al., 2015). The argument of one informer supports this research finding as to how they were inspired to spend money for the family.

Usually, money is used for household needs. I like to buy utensils for the kitchen and also spend on the educational requirements of children. (3)

Kenneth and Seena (2012) reveal that economic development is the basis for other development. Recognizing collective effort is considered a tenet of women's empowerment. Through women, empowerment leads to sustainable social development. Women's economic development leads to better living status in the family, and the children's educational, nutritional, and health needs are well satisfied. One participant commented that,

Ten years before, I was hesitant to go to the hospital for treatment. Nevertheless, now I know that health is essential and should be a prime concern, and I also have the affordability to get better treatment. (5)

The literature also supports the argument that self-efficacy and self-esteem have been related to socio-economic status and various aspects of health and health-related behaviours (Adler & Stewart, 2004). Now, women are more aware of the need to care for their physical and mental health. Untreated morbidity was a severe issue of high-range women.

My role and voice in the family have been changed. Now, I have a good position at home and am recognized as a full-fledged person. In all decisions related to the household, I have a clear-cut voice. (2)

Studies have shown that women generally invest more earnings in their families than men.

Earnings are transferred to individual accounts, giving women increased control over their finances. Hence, more money is available for expenses like children's education, family health care, and house maintenance.

Discussion

Looking at the situation of women in Kerala since independence, it is indisputable that there has been a timely change in all spheres during the last ten years. The development of women is made possible by some positive changes reflected in society and culture. It is significant to examine what those factors are. Why have women become socially acceptable? Going through the case studies mentioned above, it is clear that Economic Empowerment is becoming a visual element of Women's Independence and visibility. Having one's income is recognized in the family and gradually reflected in the community.

It should be noted that organizations working for the upliftment of women, especially the government, have ensured this financial security. At the same time, there was a progressive change in how women felt and thought about themselves. The tag of being a victim of violence and exploitation was changed to the realization that she has apparent attitudes, abilities, and her own space.

The researcher does not argue that the development of women is complete in all spheres. It does not mean that women are devoid of all kinds of exploitation. On the contrary, the researcher argues that there has been a positive change in the status of high-range women over the past ten years. The main reason behind this change is their economic empowerment and subsequent decentralization of power in women's hands. Powerlessness is felt in empty hands. How power was decentralized to women? When women earned income through different means, the family's power sources were divided. Women were also given the power enjoyed by the family's sole breadwinner (lord of the house). The origin of different sources of power within the family made the family atmosphere more democratic. The postmodern notion, as well as the feminist perspective, emphasizes the power relation that exists between men and women. At the same time, the internal barriers that prevent women from exercising power in the family and community should be recognized (Rowlands, 1998).

Social work perspective to enhance further women's visibility

Bhagyalakshmi (2004), in the article "Women's Empowerment - Miles to Go," points out that India, as a signatory to the U.N. Convention, has taken several measures to ensure women's total development and advancement. The women-specific programs are showing positive results in

empowering women; until now, one feels there are miles to go and promises to keep. From a social work perspective, women's empowerment or strengthening starts with mitigating structural problems to combat discrimination against women. Structural constraints in the family and society prevent women's visibility, which might be the societal and cultural stereotypes and conventions. Social work should address these misconceptions by redefining, reconstructing, and conceptualizing the already internalized misconstructions. The process should start with women's self-reflection.

Education can be used as an empowerment process grounded in several theoretical models, including liberation-oriented (Freire, 1970). Emancipation is possible by breaking the societal expectations already internalized by women to perform the roles of submissive wives, natural careers, and unpaid labourers. This mindset is deeply ingrained among women in the high-range areas. To tackle this issue, the Kerala government's Department of Women and Child Wing is launching innovative and thought-provoking advertisements to eliminate discrimination against women. The campaign titled 'Ini Venda Vittuveezhcha' (no more compromises) contains illustrations to stop blaming women's clothes. For example, under the caption "the decent clothing," it says, "It is not the dressing that should change; it is the outlook." The work is a direct dig at the victim-blaming argument that women have been fighting for ages – "it is the women's clothes that brought on the attack." Also, the campaign delves into a variety of issues, like body shaming, victim-blaming, sexual harassment, workplace harassment, equality in workplaces, domestic violence, choices, and equality. The campaign declares that it is time women stop compromising and not let such abuses pass.

Social work interventions often target key components of women's personal development, including self-efficacy, self-esteem, and assertiveness. Much of the literature deals with components and sub-elements of personal development, such as self-efficacy, self-esteem, mastery, perceived competence, and assertiveness (Bolton & Brooking, 1998). These soft skills are essential for developing capabilities. Through assertiveness, women can prevent all forms of violence within and outside the family.

According to Bandura (1986: 452), a group with a sense of collective efficacy will mobilize their efforts and resources to cope with external obstacles. Those convinced of their collective inefficacy will cease trying. A community or village can encourage a sense of collective efficacy by engaging its residents to work together to build a strengthened, self-directing community that unites and motivates its members (Biswas, 2004). For village women, the success in shaping their

social and economic lives lies partly in the shared sense of efficacy to bring their collective influence into action to achieve group-oriented goals. Social work plays a crucial role in promoting women's personal development through various interventions and support mechanisms. Social work programs often focus on empowering women by providing skill development in areas such as financial literacy, vocational training, and leadership skills. These initiatives are designed to enhance women's self-efficacy, confidence, and resilience, enabling them to effectively navigate challenges and pursue opportunities. Additionally, social workers provide essential supportive counseling and therapy tailored to address women's specific needs, including trauma recovery, domestic violence, and mental health concerns. Such interventions have been shown to improve women's self-esteem and overall well-being. Social work also advocates for gender equity through policy advocacy and community engagement, promoting equal access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities for women. By fostering supportive networks and advocating for social justice, social workers contribute to creating environments where women can thrive and achieve their full potential.

Conclusion

While most societal systems fail to quantify women's contributions, particularly in agriculture and household activities, this study has demonstrated how this invisibility perpetuates economic and social marginalization. The study has depicted the experiences of high-range women in the Idukki district, Kerala, over the past decade, highlighting their transition from invisibility to visibility. Factors influencing this transformation, such as access to education, economic opportunities, and supportive government policies, emphasize the importance of recognizing and valuing women's contributions in rural areas. Looking ahead, sustained efforts from governmental and non-governmental sectors are imperative to empower rural women fully, ensuring their comprehensive participation and visibility across social, political, economic, and cultural domains. Social work practice must be tailored to these rural contexts, advocating for policies and interventions that promote gender equity and empower rural women to achieve their potential.

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