

## **EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN AND REDUCING GENDER DISCRIMINATION THROUGH KUDUMBASHREE PROGRAMME**

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Kerala is a State with an impressive array of achievements in the field of women development. It has high female literacy rate of 86.2 per cent, a low IMR of 13.9 against the national average of 80, a favourable sex ratio of 1032 female/1000 male, low MMR 0.8/1000, high life expectancy ratio of 74 female/70 male etc. However, in spite of all these achievements the conspicuous absence of women in the public domain remains as a paradox of the Kerala model of development and it is evident from the fact given below.

The economic marginalization of women in the development process has drawn considerable attention during recent years. While the female work participation in India increased from 19.7 per cent to 22.7 per cent between 1981 and 1991, in Kerala the ratio declined from 16.6 per cent to 15.9 per cent during the same period. The incidence of unemployment among female in the State is higher than that among males by 5 times in rural areas and 3 times in urban areas. The unemployment in Kerala is severe and is 3 times larger when compared at the All-India level.

The sexual division of labour has resulted in the concentration of women in lowpaying unorganized sector such agricultural labour, cottage and traditional industries and selected service sectors. Despite the powerful trade union movement, equal wages for equal work still remain a mirage and gender discrimination at work place is widely prevalent.

The marginalization of women in the economic process and lack of control over resources have been major impediments in improving the status of women. The violence against women and incidence of sexual harassment continue to increase (number of registered crimes increased from 1862 in 1991 to 4937 in 1996) despite the general progressive political environment in the State, active involvement of women as leaders at various levels are lacking. The above fact clearly indicates the existence of gender discrimination in all aspects and form.

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If this situation continues for a longer period, it will hamper the balance growth and development of the economy in the State. To find a solution for the problems the Government of Kerala has designed a scheme called "Kudumbashree". It is a unique scheme and it overcomes the limitation of all the schemes implemented by the government so far in bringing gender equality and empowerment of women. The scheme aims at empowerment of women, giving them a central place in the programmes meant for their benefit. The details and the methods of functioning of the scheme are given below.

The poor women families identified will be organized into Neighborhood Groups (NHG) representing 15 to 40 families. A five-member team elected from the NHGs will be cutting edge of the programme. NHGs will be federated democratically into Area Development Societies (ADS) at the Ward level and then into Community Development Societies (CDS) at the Panchayat / Municipal level. Their organizational structures will provide opportunities for collective public action.

Providing more information/ training, weekly meetings of the NHGs, sharing of experiences, discussions, organized/unorganized training etc, will broaden their outlook on better health, better, education, better social and economic status. To facilitate economic empowerment, suitable skill up gradation training will be given to women. Enabling women to realize that their latent potential, strengthening them through self-help are the main objectives of Kudumbashree. Small savings generated at the families are pooled at various levels as thrift and used to attract credit from banks, which will operate as 24 hour informal bank for the poor, acting as a sub-system of the formal banks.

The needs identified at NHG level are shaped as micro plan which is integrated into mini plans at ADS level and action plan at CDS level. Kudumbashree promotes self-help approach for building houses, latrines, access to drinking water, sanitary facilities etc., availing the minimum support from the Government. Common infrastructural facilities in the community strengthen them further. Providing skill up gradation trainings, self-employment opportunity and infrastructural development through wage employment schemes are the preparing grounds for further development of successful micro enterprises. Kudumbashree is bent on giving necessary resource support and facilitates forward / backward linkages etc., to promote micro-entrepreneurship among poor women.

The skill identification, fixing priorities, availing resources, bridging gap between needs and resources in a cost effective manner etc., are taught to the poor women groups in various phases. In the decentralization of power to the local bodies and common man, Kudumbashree can act as a healthy sub-system facilitating the participation of poor women in the planning, implementation and monitoring of the programme. Interaction by women collectively will help them to have a better understanding, which will lead to emergence of leadership. This will help to ensure efficient women leadership to elected bodies in future. Reaching out family through women,

and community through family, is the ultimate target of Kudumbashree scheme.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The objective of the study is to assess the level of empowerment of women and reducing gender discrimination through this programme. The sample size would cover 100 beneficiaries and the data relating to economic and social empowerment will be collected. The study will also employ necessary statistical tools and techniques to analyze the data. The study will also help the policy makers in formulating various strategies to make the women as more empowered.