

Breaking Barriers, Building Business

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Abstract

Increased and improved participation in women's entrepreneurship is the road towards sustainable economic development and gender equality. Apart from providing employment, women's entrepreneurship ensures financial independence and sustainability of the community. Kerala, the southern state of India, is known for its progressive social indices and high literacy rates. It has experienced a stable rise in women entrepreneurs. But still, statistics show that our female economic participation was too low, i.e., 18.23 per cent (Census of India, 2011). But later, for the last 5 years, the Kerala government has been working on women's empowerment and on a good industrial climate. As a result, in January 2023, our minister, P. Rajeev, announced the registration of 35000 new women enterprises in Kerala. The study focused on the severe conditions that influence women-led enterprises, such as financial access and training, that impede their scalability. Training and financial support play a key role in increasing women's enterprises, and RSETI has a crucial impact on creating women-led enterprises. Various government schemes like the Prime Minister's Employment Generation Programme (PMEGP), Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana (PMMY), and Stand-Up India Programme (SUPI) have positively correlated with the rise of women-led businesses in Kerala. The continued support and further enhancement of the policies will result in more women-led businesses in our economy.

Keywords: Women entrepreneurship, Ease of Doing Business, Kerala

Introduction

Participation of women in every kind of economic activity plays a crucial role in the growth and development of the economy. It makes them more confident and gives them financial freedom, which can later uplift various socio-economic indicators. Mishra et al. (2024) in their study clearly stated that several factors impact women-led businesses, and these factors can significantly affect businesses; policymakers can focus on these for the upliftment of women-led businesses. The three main components that they suggested were Financial Barrier, Regulatory Landscape, and Societal baking. All three factors show a good positive association with women-led enterprises. And the study suggests noting this to facilitate women's entrepreneurship.

Kerala, the southern state of India, has always been renowned for its developed and consistent development indicators, high female literacy, and a high women-to-men ratio (Census of India,2011). Our exceptional human development indicators and social development even created a term like the ‘Kerala Model’ to inspire every economy. We were always a separate niche regarding development. While keeping all this in mind, it’s hard to say that Kerala’s female work participation was low, i.e. 18.23 per cent (Census of India,2011), compared to other states. However, recent data show good improvements in women’s economic participation. The Worker Population Ratio (WPR) increased from 16.6 per cent in 2017-18 to 25.6 per cent in 2020-21 for rural women and, for urban women, it increased from 16 to 20.8 per cent in the same reference period. Along with this, our male-female gap in workforce participation has reduced significantly over the period by 4.4 per cent (IWWAGE & LEAD at Krea University, 2023). The data shows that 68.9 per cent are own-account workers. Recently, our Minister for Industries. Mr. P. Rajeev has announced that through the “year of enterprises,” Kerala has witnessed the registration of over 35000 women-launched businesses¹.

With these strong positive indicators, it is evident that Kerala has made some commendable progress in fostering female economic participation. In this era, where gender equality and sustainability speak loudly, we must check on that aspect too. Kerala never had any black marks on its women’s empowerment, and our government has also implemented various kinds of women’s empowerment programs. Kerala Startup Mission (KSUM), the Soft Loan Scheme for Women Entrepreneurs, and Kudumbashree were some of the key government initiatives that upheld women entrepreneurship in the economy.

Literature Review

There are several studies related to women entrepreneurship, and we have a few studies in the Kerala Context. Dhanya & Sivakumar (2010) analysed the association between women entrepreneurship and kudumbasrees and found a positive association between variables. The study was particularly focused on micro-enterprises. Cyriac et al. (2008) have also conducted a study focusing on micro-enterprises, and they found that the independence and confidence of women have increased as a result of their participation in micro-enterprises. A study by Vatharkar (2012) says that the number of women using government schemes and support to launch their business is comparatively low. Bruni et al. (2004), going through the concept of ‘entrepreneur mentality’, say that existing studies always consider the male norms as standards, and they highlight the need for normalisation of male experiences in business by reflecting on how entrepreneurial knowledge is generated.

¹ <https://x.com/PRajeevOfficial/status/1609898837107412992?mx=2>

Objectives

- To assess the current status of women entrepreneurs in Kerala.
- To examine the role of training in fostering women-led enterprises in Kerala.
- To examine the role of government funding schemes like PMMY, and SUPI.

Methodology

The study is analytical and descriptive in approach, and it uses secondary data. Various Annual reports, Udyam Registration Data, Women and Men in India Reports (MoSPI), and Economic Census have been used for the study. Averages, Trend Analysis, Growth Percentages, and Graphical tools like Pie charts and Hierarchical charts were used in the study.

Results & Discussions

As per the MSME Report by the Ministry of India, 608.41 lakh, which covers 95.98 per cent of our MSMEs are proprietary concerns. Among that, the major proportion, 79.63 per cent, is owned by males. Only 20.37 per cent of the businesses are owned by women, and women-led businesses are high in micro-sector enterprises.

Table 1. *Gender-wise distribution of MSME, India*

Category	Male	Female	All
Micro	79.56	20.44	100
Small	94.74	5.26	100
Medium	97.33	2.67	100
All	79.63	20.37	100

Note: From MSME annual report 2023–24 (Ministry of Micro, Small & Medium Enterprises, Government of India, 2024).

While looking at the state-wise details as per NSS 73rd round, out of 2143816 Proprietary MSMEs, 1647853 are male-owned and 495962 are female-owned in Kerala. Even though the ratio seems to be around 3:1, when compared with other states, the Share of State among All MSMEs with Male Owners(per cent) is 3.40, while for females it's 4.00, and this signifies a positive confirmation.

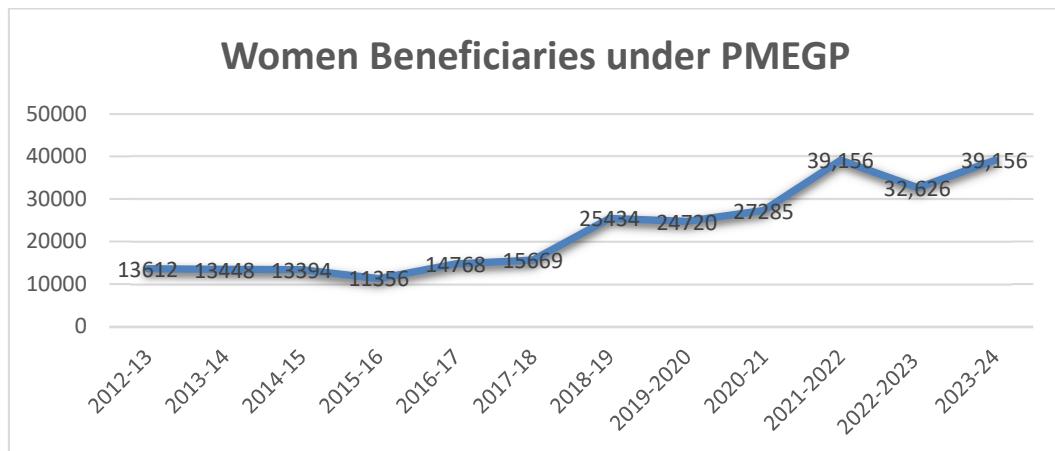
Table 2. State-wise distribution of MSME by gender of owners

Sl. No	State/Uts	Male	Female	All	Share of State among All MSMEs with male Owners (%)	Share of State among All MSMEs with female Owners (%)
1	West Bengal	5583138	2901324	8484462	11.52	23.42
2	Tamil Nadu	3441489	1285263	4726752	7.1	10.37
3	Telangana	1459262	92724	2432046	3.01	7.85
4	Karnataka	2684469	936905	3621374	5.54	7.56
5	Uttar Pradesh	8010932	8627870	8873782	16.35	6.96
6	Andhra Pradesh	2160318	83803	2998351	4.46	6.76
7	Gujarat	2375858	826640	3202499	4.9	6.67
8	Maharashtra	3798343	101197	4593953	7.84	6.47
9	Kerala	1647853	495962	2143816	3.4	4
10	Rajasthan	2261127	380007	26415678	4.67	2.99
11	Madhya Pradesh	2275251	370427	2645678	4.7	2.99
12	Jharkhand	1250953	310388	1561341	2.58	2.51
13	Odisha	1563793	295460	1862865	3.24	2.38
14	Punjab	1183871	224185	1408056	2.44	1.81
15	Bihar	3239698	168347	3408044	6.69	1.36
16	Haryana	831645	98309	929953	1.72	0.79
17	Delhi	827234	86742	913977	1.71	0.7
18	Manipur	363834	86604	172987	0.18	0.8
19	Jammu & Kashmir	624056	74785	698841	1.29	0.6
20	Chhattisgarh	727208	71621	798403	1.5	0.57
21	Assam	1128411	66665	1195078	2.33	0.54
22	Himachal Pradesh	329595	50368	379963	0.68	0.41
23	Meghalaya	72191	39462	111653	0.15	0.32
24	Tripura	179169	28042	207212	0.37	0.23
25	Puducherry	65350	27072	92422	0.13	0.22
26	Uttarakhand	380000	20864	400964	0.78	0.17
27	Nagaland	65778	20865	86643	0.14	0.17
28	Mizoram	20439	13698	34173	0.04	0.11
29	Goa	57133	10185	67948	0.12	0.09
30	Arunachal Pradesh	16153	6274	22427	0.03	0.05
31	Chandigarh	44321	5560	49881	0.09	0.04
32	Sikkim	20880	5036	25916	0.04	0.03
33	A & N Islands	14302	4006	18328	0.12	0.09
34	Dadra & Nagar Haveli	12900	2629	15529	0.03	0.02

Note: From *MSME annual report 2023–24* (Ministry of Micro, Small & Medium Enterprises, Government of India, 2024).

The Prime Minister's Employment Generation Programme (PMEGP), which was implemented to enhance and support the youth, women, and weaker sections, has played a vital role in the upliftment of women in India.

Figure 1. Trend analysis of women beneficiaries under PMEGP (2021-2024)



Note: From *MSME annual report 2023–24* (Ministry of Micro, Small & Medium Enterprises, Government of India, 2024).

The number of women beneficiaries under the Prime Minister's Employment Generation Programme had an initial declining phase from 2012 to 2016, with a sharp recovery followed in 2017 and 2018. The highest increase took place in 2021-22 with +43.51% growth.

Women-Led Enterprises in Kerala

An investigation of proprietary MSMEs in Kerala shows a relatively large gap in ownership between genders. Of the 21,43,816 proprietary MSMEs that are registered under the Udyam portal, 16,47,853 (77%) are owned by males and 4,95,962 (23%) are owned by females². The male-to-female ownership index was 3:1, indicating that women entrepreneurs are indeed progressing but are still subject to structural constraints.

The number of women-led MSMEs in Kerala, as per Udyam Registration, shows a significant rise between 2021 and 2023. For the year 2021-22, 25243 women-led units were registered, and during 2022-23, the number has been raised to 50228, which shows a higher growth rate. This surge could be a result of our government-funded programmes and initiatives like PMMY, SUPI, the “Year of Enterprises”, etc.

Although the gender-wise list of MSMEs has been available during the Fourth All India Census of Micro, Small & Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) conducted in the 2006-07 period, more detailed and structured data is available from 2020 onwards after the implementation of the Udyam Registration portal. The data retrieved from Udyam website using the keywords ‘manufacturing’ and ‘service’ are as follows. As per the available data on February 2025, Kerala has 97837 MSME units registered under Udyam of which 10311 belong to the manufacturing sector and 87527 belong to the service sector.

² Note: From *MSME annual report 2023–24* (Ministry of Micro, Small & Medium Enterprises, Government of India, 2024).

Table 3. Women-led enterprises in Kerala (Udyam Registration)

Manufacturing Sector		Service Sector	
Women-led Units	Total Units	Women-led Units	Total Units
4434	10311	21243	87527

Note: *Udyam, February 2025*

Women-led enterprises make up 43 per cent of total manufacturing units, which is a stronger representation, but as per absolute count, we have 21243 women-led enterprises in the service sector, which is much higher than the manufacturing sector, i.e., 4434.

Table 4. Category-wise women-led businesses in Kerala

	Category	Total enterprise	women-led enterprise
Manufacturing	10792-Coffee curing, roasting, grinding blending etc. and manufacturing of coffee products	863	241
	Other semi-processed, processed or instant foods n.e.c. except farinaceous products and malted foods and manufacturing activities like manufacture of egg powder, sambar powder etc. (this excludes the activities covered under 10619)	8924	3995
	Weaving, manufacturing of man-made fiber and man-made mixture fabrics.	216	131
	Manufacture of various other chemical products n.e.c. (antiknock preparations, anti-freeze preparations, liquids for hydraulic transmission, composite diagnostic or laboratory reagents, writing or drawing ink, chemical substance used in manufacturing of pesticides and other chemical products)	272	62
	Manufacturing of lead, Zinc and tin products and alloys	28	5
	Manufacturing of chrome, manganese and nickel products alloys	7	0
	Services incidental to off shore oil extraction	94	18
Service	Services incidental to on shore oil extraction	54	15
	Services incidental to off shore gas extraction	33	5
	Services incidental to on shore gas extraction	22	1
	Other service activities related to printing n.e.c.	1201	309
	-Manufacture of self-propelled railway or tramway coaches, vans and trucks, maintenance or service vehicles	17	0
	Remediation activities and other waste management services	318	45
	Retail sale of other household appliances n.e.c. (security systems, such as locking devices, safes, and vaults,	2568	388

without installation or maintenance services etc., wooden, cork and wickerwork goods, sewing and knitting machine and other household utensils and durables n.e.c.)		
Long-distance bus services	839	138
Charters, excursions and other occasional coach services	137	27
Sea and coastal ferry service	611	89
River ferry service	169	28
River cruise, water taxi, boat services	321	66
Helicopter services	45	8
Freight air transport services	244	35
Support service at railway stations, bus stations, bridges etc.	90	11
Other land transport services n.e.c	2343	303
Service activities incidental to water transportation	305	39
Firefighting and fire-prevention services at airports	96	10
Activities of food service contractors (e.g. for transportation companies)	16933	4384
Activities of basic telecom services: telephone, telex and telegraph (includes the activities of STD/ISD booths)	176	21
Other information technology and computer service activities n.e.c	8090	2426
Providing data entry services	1703	703
Telephone based information services	459	70
Other information service activities n.e.c.	5831	1899
Other monetary intermediation services n.e.c.	273	61
Other financial service activities, except insurance and pension funding activities, n.e.c	3613	769
Activities auxiliary to financial service activities n.e.c.	1337	340
Services of graphic designers	899	139
Other reservation service and related activities	4243	703
Security systems service activities	790	90
Landscape care and maintenance service activities	4942	440
Combined office administrative service activities	574	115
Photocopying, duplicating and bluprinting services	1341	515
Other specialised office support services activities	736	265
Other business support service activities n.e.c.	5450	1124
Regulatory agencies relating to other social services n.e.c. excluding social security	80	18
Academic tutoring services	1385	522
Other educational services n.e.c.	2989	871
Educational support services	5526	1690
Social activities such as escort services, marriage bureaus	8260	1809

Pet care services such as boarding, grooming and training pets etc.	1751	572
Coin-operated personal service machines such as photo booths, weighing machines, blood pressure checking machines etc.	639	152
Total	97837	25677

Note: Udyam, February 2025

The data shows that Kerala has increased the participation of women in various kinds of enterprises. Weaving and manufacturing of man-made fibre and man-made mixture fabrics have the highest rate of women-led businesses. This is in line with the findings of Mohandas (2016). Semi-processed and instant food are also attractive sectors for women. The participation of women in the service sector can be mainly dominated by IT, Education & Food. Concerning transportation and energy, they have minimal participation.

There is zero participation of women-led businesses in the manufacturing of chrome, manganese, and nickel products, alloys, and for Lead, Zinc and Tin products: 5 enterprises out of 28. This can be due to its risky nature.

Figure 2. Women-led business in Kerala



Note: Author's own compilation from Ministry of MSME, Annual Report 2023-24 (Government of India)

Financial Support to Women

As per the data available on 24.11.2023, a 30.64 crore loan has been sanctioned to women all over India, which was 69 per cent of total loans granted under Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana (PMMY). Further, under Stand-up India (SUP), out of 2.09 lakh of sanctioned loans, 1.77 lakh, i.e., 84 per cent of loans, have been sanctioned to women entrepreneurs³. These collateral-free institutional credit by PMMY and loans, provided

³ Press Information Bureau Government of India Ministry of Finance

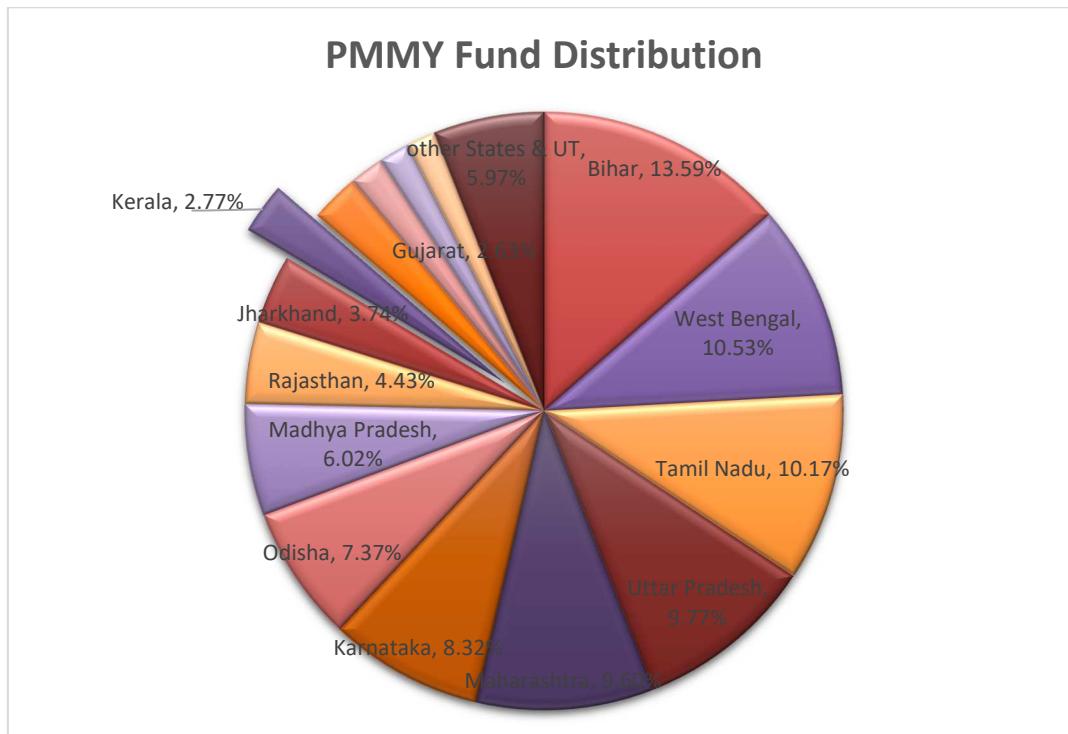
for setting up new green field enterprises by SUPI have played a significant role in the upliftment of women to entrepreneurship.

Table 5. Number of loans granted under Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana (PMMY) & Stand Up India Scheme (SUPI)

Sl. No.	State/ U.T. Name	No. of Loan A/cs	
		PMMY	SUPI
1	Andaman and Nicobar Islands	909	111
2	Andhra Pradesh	1,304,170	3195
3	Arunachal Pradesh	11,308	65
4	Assam	1,003,223	564
5	Bihar	11,237,541	1958
6	Chandigarh	4,555	104
7	Chhattisgarh	1,541,095	811
8	Dadra and Nagar Haveli & Daman and Diu	6,648	22
9	Delhi	304,780	664
10	Goa	40,741	140
11	Gujarat	2,177,699	3166
12	Haryana	1,288,364	1424
13	Himachal Pradesh	68,060	707
14	Jharkhand	3,089,545	793
15	Karnataka	6,875,431	4654
16	Kerala	2,290,269	2494
17	Lakshadweep	586	0
18	Madhya Pradesh	4,981,619	2437
19	Maharashtra	7,938,879	6080
20	Manipur	50,205	93
21	Meghalaya	25,173	62
22	Mizoram	24,945	74
23	Nagaland	18,869	90
24	Odisha	6,092,355	1503
25	Pondicherry	144,861	86
26	Punjab	1,355,485	1723
27	Rajasthan	3,667,077	2809
28	Sikkim	14,461	90
29	Tamil Nadu	8,411,039	4918
30	Telangana	736,897	1534
31	Tripura	536,785	106
32	Uttar Pradesh	8,081,073	3686
33	Uttarakhand	509,585	319
34	West Bengal	8,704,761	2348
35	Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir	141,804	223
36	Union Territory of Ladakh	5,275	31
Total		82,686,072	49,084

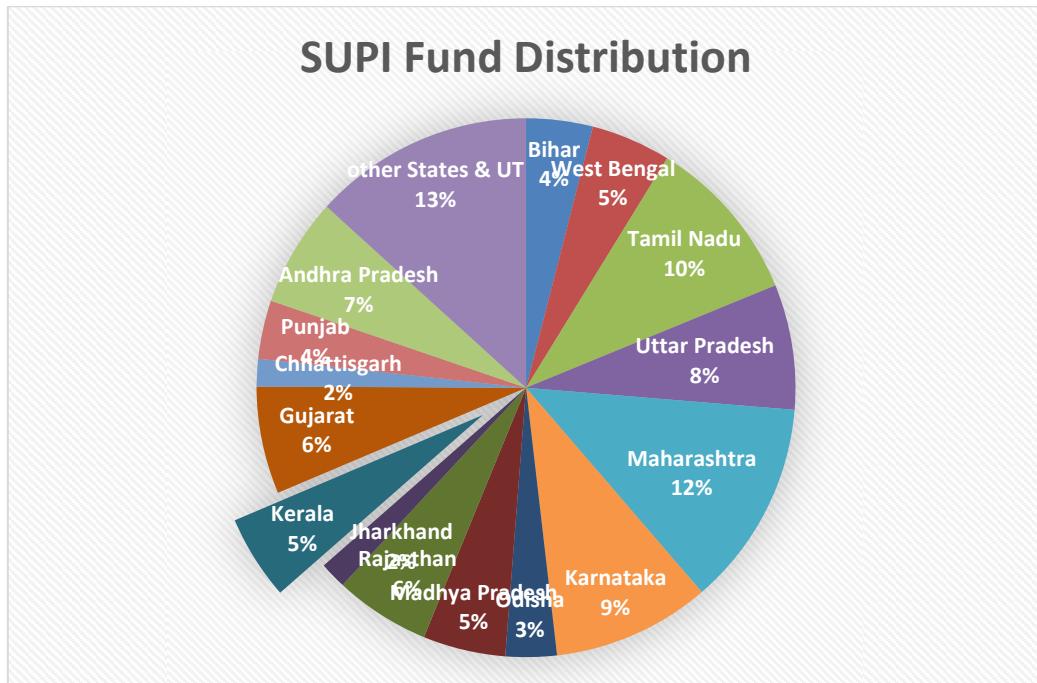
Note: Rajya sabha unstarred question no. 1260 answered ON 13.12.2023

Figure 3. Fund distribution among Indian states under the scheme *Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana*



Note: Author's own compilation based on PMMY (Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana) Annual Report 2023-24, Government of India.

Figure 4. Fund distribution among Indian states under the scheme *Stand Up India*.



Note: Author's own compilation based on Stand Up India Scheme Report 2023-24, Ministry of Finance, Government of India

Role of Training for Women-Led Businesses

There were several programmes conducted for the upliftment and training of women entrepreneurs. Rural Self-Employment Training Institutes were one among them. And their results for the years 2021 to 2023 show the role of RESTI in fostering new enterprises, especially for women. Table 6 represents the effectiveness of the training program for the creation of new enterprises.

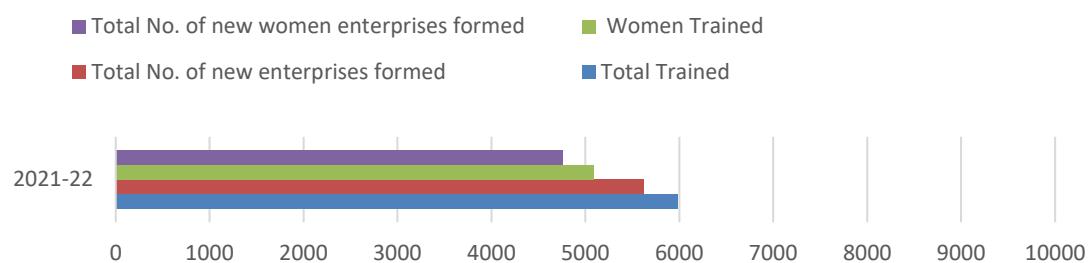
Table 6. *Number of new enterprises formed by candidates trained under RSETI - Kerala*

Year	Total				women			
	Trained	Settled under both self employment & wage employment	Total No. of new enterprises formed	Employed under Wage Employment	Trained	Settled under both self employment & wage employment	Total No. of new enterprises formed	Employed under Wage Employment
2021-22	5980	5801	5625	176	5092	4842	4756	86
2022-23	9970	7990	7804	186	7951	6938	6829	109

Note: Rajyasabha unstarred question no. 1260 answered on 13.12.20023

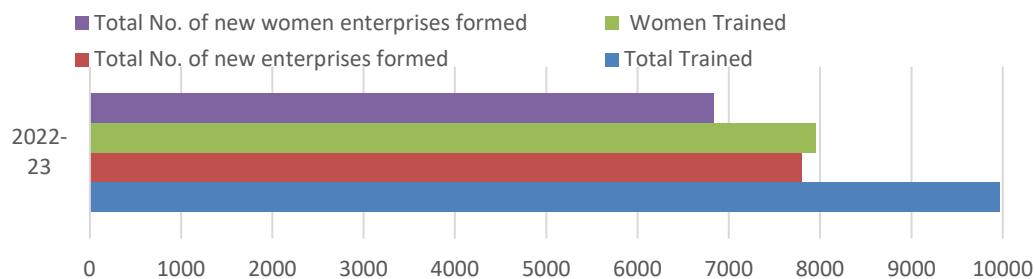
While analysing the growth, new enterprises grew by 38.74 per cent, and women-owned enterprises increased by 43.54 per cent, showing a faster growth than the total enterprises. From the table, it is also evident that the self-employment to wage employment ratio for women indicates a rising trend, increasing from 56.30 in 2021-22 to 63.65 in 2022-23. This clearly shows the growing preference for self-employment over wage jobs.

Figure 5. *Number of new enterprises formed by candidates trained under RSETI – Kerala (2021-22)*



Note: Rajyasabha unstarred question no. 1260 answered on 13.12.20023

Figure 6. Number of new enterprises formed by candidates trained under RSETI – Kerala (2022-23)



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Kerala has generally stood out better than a lot of other Indian states in gender-related development indicators, but there is proof of disparity in either business: capital, market linkages, and institutional support are critical. Nationally, female entrepreneurship constitutes less than 20 per cent of the total enterprises, and some comparisons are fairly better in Kerala, which reflects the progress of its social policies, although the gap still exists, primarily due to financial, cultural, and regulatory factors.

Growth Patterns for Women Entrepreneurship

Kerala state has seen a gradual rise in the number of women entrepreneurs, spurred on by proactive government policies of self-employment programs. The Year of Enterprises (2022-23) program has enabled over 1,39,000 new ventures, of which 35,000⁴ belong to women. The Kerala Startup Mission (KSUM) has recently been supporting women-owned ventures in IT, handicrafts, food processing, and green businesses. However, the growth of women entrepreneurs is still far slower than that of male-owned enterprises. This is because of scaling difficulties, lack of formal mentoring, and the great concentration of women in the micro sector.

A Few Disadvantages to Women's Entrepreneurship in Kerala

Even though human development indices are high for Kerala, many obstacles keep women from entering business activities. Most women-led enterprises operate at the local or regional level or at their comfort level and do not try to have access to national or international markets. However, the government is trying to overcome all these barriers and to uplift our women-led businesses, which is becoming fruitful as per the results that are visible in statistics.

Some other Policy Interventions

Kerala has been active in introducing numerous policies aimed at using education for the empowerment of women entrepreneurs, including:

Kudumbashree Mission: Brings over 43 lakh women into micro-enterprises or SHGs.

⁴ <https://x.com/PRajeevOfficial/status/1609898837107412992?mx=2>

KSIDC WE Mission: Funds Women-Run Enterprises with Capital Assistance for Medium Enterprises.

Mahila Coir Yojana: Promotes women's involvement in Kerala's coir industry.

Women Entrepreneurs Scheme of Kerala Bank: Offers subsidised loans for start-ups by women.

Conclusion

The study highlights the increasing participation of women-led businesses in the economy, which will contribute to the socio-economic development. Even though Kerala had fewer women-led businesses earlier, with proper financial support and training, we have increased our participation in the economy. Rural Self-Employment Training Institutes (RSETIs) have shown a crucial role in the fostering of women-led enterprises. An increased number of financial supports through programmes like PMMY & SUPI shows a positive association between financial support and the number of women-led businesses. The evidence suggests that training and government funding schemes emerge as a crucial enabler of entrepreneurship and have a significant role in the creation of women-led entrepreneurs in the economy.

Implication for Future Research

- Future studies could study how effectively women utilise funds from PMMY & SUPI.
- An investigation could be conducted to analyse how skill development and entrepreneurial development translate into measurable outcomes.
- Comparative research across states to analyse how Kerala differs from its counterparts, with a main focus on women entrepreneurship.
- Long-term follow-up studies could shed more light on the scenario and could go deeper.

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