

Special Article

The Feminization of Responsibility and Obligation: A Case Study of Kudumbashree in Two Cities

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Abstract

This article investigates the gendered dynamics within Kerala's Kudumbashree program, focusing on its dual role as a poverty alleviation initiative and a platform for women's empowerment. While Kudumbashree has achieved significant strides in improving livelihoods, it often disproportionately shifts the burden of poverty alleviation onto women. This dynamic perpetuates inequities, positioning women—already the most affected by poverty—as the primary agents of systemic change. The research examines how these responsibilities redefine women's roles in households and communities, exclude men from shared obligations, and bring in time poverty for the women involved via a comparative case study on the lives of women in Kudumbashree from two cities—Kochi and Thiruvananthapuram. Employing frameworks like Bourdieusian field theory and feminist critiques of neoliberal welfare, this analysis calls for a reimagining of empowerment narratives, advocating for more equitable developmental practices that transcend symbolic gestures and address structural inequalities. It critically interrogates the changes brought about by Kudumbashree in the lives of Kerala women to raise a rather pertinent question—Are there better practices to best practices?

Keywords: Kudumbashree, feminization of responsibility, gendered division of labor

1. Introduction

The Kudumbashree initiative originated within the socio-political framework of the People's Plan Movement in Kerala, a pioneering participatory governance strategy launched in 1996. An offshoot of the seventh and eighth Five-Year Plans, this movement emphasized grassroots engagement in planning and decision-making as part of the decentralization of state power (Isaac & Franke, 2002).

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This was a marked shift from the earlier lens of planning which viewed women as encumbrances in the path of development and as passive recipients of the fruits of progress, which undermined their roles as active citizens and did little to address the systemic injustices that led to discrimination and subordination.

Central to Kudumbashree's innovative approach is the concept of Neighbourhood Groups (NHGs), which were designed not only as financial collectives but also as platforms for participatory planning and localized development. NHGs are government-sponsored entities that specifically target high-risk households identified through rigorous, multi-dimensional criteria. They operate within the Panchayati Raj framework, leveraging funds like the Women Component Plan (WCP) to implement women-centric projects. This integration highlights Kudumbashree's commitment to collective action at the neighborhood level, aligning with Kerala's broader traditions of inclusive community organization.

The organizational structure of Kudumbashree operates as a three-tiered framework, federating NHGs into Area Development Societies (ADS) at the ward level and Community Development Societies (CDS) at the municipal or district level. This system, an extension of the Panchayati Raj framework, ensures seamless coordination and implementation of poverty eradication programs. By promoting self-help over subsidies, Kudumbashree fosters empowerment among below-poverty-line families, with a particular focus on women and children. A key feature of this structure is the establishment of Thrift and Credit Societies (TCS), which facilitate savings and credit access for NHG members (Anand, 2023).

Kudumbashree's mission underscores its holistic approach to poverty eradication, aiming to tackle multiple dimensions of deprivation through community-driven action. It moves beyond income-based assessments by empowering communities to self-assess vulnerabilities and adopt corrective measures. Such transparency and inclusivity ensure that the root causes of poverty are addressed comprehensively (Shihabudheen, 2013).

Through active participation in NHGs, women progress to leadership roles within ADS and CDS structures, gaining visibility and influence in local governance. Practical engagement in thrift mobilization, loan management, and micro-enterprises enhance their financial literacy and self-reliance, breaking intergenerational cycles of poverty.

The very motto of kudumbashree is women empowerment through Community-Based Organizations. The aim is "*Reach out the family through women and reach out the society through family.*" In such paradigms, women are positioned as conduits of policy, with resources channeled through them in the expectation that they will translate into broader familial and societal well-being (Molyneux, 2006; Gilbert, 2002). While such an approach may yield immediate developmental benefits, it risks entrenching unequal gender roles by reinforcing traditional norms of female altruism and sacrifice.

This dynamic not only perpetuates systemic inequalities but also imposes severe costs on women's health, well-being, and agency. The reliance on women's unpaid or poorly remunerated and less acknowledged labor, coupled with the exclusion of men from these responsibilities, entrenches a highly unequal model of family and community dynamics.

As noted by Bradshaw (2010), the failure to involve fathers or male family members in unpaid domestic work perpetuates a model of family life that is fundamentally inequitable.

It is noteworthy that while the term *Kudumbashree* transliterates from Malayalam as "prosperity of the family," the program's NHGs predominantly target womenfolk, often to the exclusion of men. This focus persists despite the patriarchal realities in which men exercise significant control over familial resources and decision-making. The seeming paradox of *Kudumbashree*'s structure lies in its gendered foundation, wherein women are positioned as both the beneficiaries and primary agents of its poverty alleviation initiatives.

Therefore, *Kudumbashree*'s operational framework has unintended consequences that are often left unaddressed. While fostering women's participation, it reinforces systemic inequities by disproportionately assigning responsibilities to women. This phenomenon, often described as the "feminization of responsibility" (Chant, 2008), raises critical questions about the program's long-term effectiveness and equity.

2. The Feminisation of Responsibility and Obligation

The "feminization of responsibility" describes the increasing expectations placed on women to shoulder economic and caregiving burdens within households, often internalizing these roles as obligatory (Chant, 2008). The "feminization of obligation" further emphasizes women's restricted agency in fulfilling these roles, even when the associated burdens exceed their capacity. *Kudumbashree* exemplifies these dynamics by positioning women as primary agents of poverty alleviation without adequately engaging men.

Women's resilience and adaptability are celebrated, but these narratives obscure the systemic inequalities and poorly paid labor underpinning their contributions. In being positioned as policy conduits, women are expected to translate limited resources into community well-being. While this approach yields short-term developmental gains, it entrenches unequal gender roles by normalizing women's unpaid labor.

Although Devika's (2016) incisive critique in "*The 'Kudumbashree Woman'* and *the Kerala Model Woman*" highlights the unintended consequences of such initiatives—such as the reinforcement of traditional gender roles—much of the current scholarship surrounding *Kudumbashree* tends to tacitly accept of women's triple shift (Duncombe & Marsden, 1993) as the norm; prioritizing the same over addressing social conditioning and deeper structural inequities. These veneers, crafted from narratives of empowerment and agency, emphasize the program's successes while concealing the feminization of responsibility, obligation, and the systemic reliance on female altruism.

3. Bourdieusian Field Theory

The concept of feminization of responsibility and obligation in *Kudumbashree* can be analyzed through Pierre Bourdieu's field theory by conceptualizing *Kudumbashree*

as a social field. This field is defined by its specific rules, stakes, and power dynamics, which influence how women participate, compete, and navigate their roles within the organization. By applying the theoretical constructs of field, habitus, and capital, we can explore the relational and structural aspects of this phenomenon.

3.1 Kudumbashree as a Social Field

In Pierre Bourdieu's terms, Kudumbashree constitutes a social field—a structured system of positions where agents (e.g., NHG members, ADS leaders, CDS leaders, and government actors) engage in struggles to accumulate and mobilize various forms of capital. The field's primary stakes revolve around community development, poverty eradication, and empowerment, which are mediated by the framework's operational dynamics, including thrift operations, micro-enterprises, and participatory governance. As a structured field, different forms of capital (economic, social, symbolic, and cultural) interact within hierarchical positions.

Women's NHGs and leadership roles (e.g., presidents and secretaries of NHGs, ADSs, and CDSs) operate within this field to advance Kudumbashree's objectives while simultaneously embedding women within a framework of societal obligations, reinforcing their roles as caregivers and community stewards.

The roles occupied by women in this field are shaped by both their positionality within Kudumbashree and the rules governing its operation. For instance, women's leadership roles in Neighbourhood Groups (NHGs) and higher tiers like ADSs and CDSs position them as critical agents in delivering state-mandated programs, managing financial resources, and driving community welfare initiatives. However, these positions also place disproportionate obligations on them, reinforcing their roles as caregivers and community stewards.

3.2 The Dynamics of Incumbents and Insurgents

Field theory's distinction between incumbents and insurgents can illuminate the stratification within Kudumbashree. Incumbents, such as male family members and government actors, often aim to maintain the field's current structure, which integrates women into formalized yet feminized roles. In contrast, insurgents—represented by certain grassroots NHG members and key office bearers in Kudumbashree, pushing for more equitable distribution of responsibilities—may challenge these dynamics, seeking systemic change to reduce the burdens placed on women while increasing their agency.

Significant change within Kudumbashree could arise from such insurgent actions—however, there is a notable lack of external governmental interventions or a reevaluation of the rules governing participation and capital accumulation.

3.3 Habitus

Women's participation in Kudumbashree is deeply influenced by their habitus—a system of ingrained dispositions shaped by their socio-cultural and economic experiences.

In this context, women are often well aware of the prevalent dispositions regarding Kudumbashree meetings in public discourse—as a neighborhood gossip congregation that indulges in petty quarrels. Many women interviewed actively countered and challenged these societal habitus, highlighting the constructive work that was being done.

- Disputes in Kudumbashree meetings reportedly mostly surrounded financial matters such as the defaulting of loans. While the better-off Kudumbashree members opposed humiliating defaulters during meetings, their lower-earning peers acknowledged that defaulting often strained their relationships, for they contribute a greater proportion of their income while bearing the same absolute risk, which worsens their relative risk position.
- Most women respondents noted increased receptiveness and support from male family members for their participation in Kudumbashree activities. There is a reported shift from the predominant male habitus when women in their households participate in Kudumbashree, as reported in Devika & Thampi, 2007. However, certain families—particularly the well-off, upper caste households with multiple male earning members still tend to view it as an ‘unnecessary’ use of women’s time. This indicates a persistence of paternalistic attitudes towards women’s leisure, wherein women’s spare time is believed to be best utilized to improve the comfort and state of their homes.

Additionally, women’s own habitus aligns with the field’s implicit nomos (organizing principles), which value caregiving and community service as central to women’s contributions. This alignment perpetuates the social illusion or *illusio*, that these responsibilities are empowering, even as they extend traditional gendered roles and increase the pressure and expectations on them.

Household work still largely remains relegated to the female members of the family. Many women respondents admit that they have not thought about how unfair or unequal the domestic division of labor really is. Many feel that status-quo traditional and cultural factors have led to the same, and some preferred giving priority to male family members. The triple burden persists as doxa, ingrained in the habitus. Participation in Kudumbashree reshapes women’s perceptions of their societal roles but does not fully dismantle patriarchal expectations.

3.4 Capital and Power Dynamics

Kudumbashree’s field dynamics revolve around the accumulation and deployment of economic, social, and cultural capital.

- **Economic Capital:** TCS enables women to generate savings and access loans, enhancing their financial independence (Kudumbashree, n.d.-d) while also tying them to responsibilities like household finance, accounting for other family members’ financial profligacy with their own incomes, assuming the role of a provider—all in addition to their respective remunerative work, household chores, and caregiving responsibilities.
- **Social Capital:** Social networks formed within NHGs, ADSs, and CDSs provide women with communal support, social cohesion, and access to resources

(Bhoola et al., 2024) but also reinforce expectations of unpaid or low-paid labor in implementing welfare schemes. Several women respondents also admitted that Kudumbashree's programs and festivities led to increased workload which further constrained their already pressed time.

- **Symbolic Capital:** Women in leadership roles within NHGs and higher tiers like ADSs and CDSs are pivotal in implementing government programs, managing community finances, and spearheading local welfare initiatives. However, these roles often impose a heavy burden on women, exacerbating their existing responsibilities as caregivers and community stewards. Accompanied by increased social obligations and responsibilities, this capital can be both empowering and burdensome.
- **Cultural Capital:** Training programs increase women's abilities and skills, elevating their status in the community. Noteworthily, in the interview, all women (without exceptions) reported their satisfaction in gaining the ability to visit banks and direct transactions and other procedures. However, this capital often remains constrained by systemic structures that limit their decision-making power.

The interplay between these forms of capital reveals how the field sustains itself: by creating incentives that simultaneously empower and overburden women.

3.5 Stabilization and Symbolic Violence

Kudumbashree operates as a relatively stable field, sustained by rules that standardize competition and maintain the dominance of incumbents. However, this stability may perpetuate symbolic violence—subtle forms of domination that legitimize and normalize women's expanded obligations. For instance, while Kudumbashree promotes empowerment, the additional responsibilities placed on women in NHGs often extend unpaid labor under the guise of participatory development, without offering equitable rewards.

3.6 Feminization of Responsibility

Bourdieu's framework suggests that the feminization of responsibility in Kudumbashree is not merely a byproduct of operational necessity but a structural feature of its field dynamics. Women's roles are shaped by the field's nomos, which prioritizes their labor in community and household spheres, framing it as both a duty and a privilege. The challenge lies in redefining the rules of the field to distribute responsibilities equitably and ensure that empowerment translates into genuine agency.

4. Citizenship: A Gendered Perspective

T.H. Marshall's *Citizenship and Social Class* (1950) conceptualizes citizenship as a collective status encompassing equal rights and obligations within a community. Marshall delineates a linear progression of rights—civil, political, and social—reflecting democratization over time.

However, feminist critiques challenge this framework's universality, highlighting how marginalized groups, particularly women, often encounter disrupted sequences of rights acquisition. Gail Omvedt notes that for historically disadvantaged groups, political enfranchisement often precedes civil rights, leaving systemic exclusions intact.

Carol Pateman's *The Sexual Contract* critiques the social contract's patriarchal underpinnings, demonstrating how citizenship perpetuates gendered hierarchies that render women subordinate. Contemporary scholars like Rian Vloet advocate for "sex-equal citizenship," emphasizing dismantling structural inequalities to achieve substantive equality.

5. Active Citizenship and the Kudumbashree Paradigm

Kudumbashree, Kerala's poverty eradication mission, provides a feminist lens to explore active citizenship. By fostering women's participation in governance and development, it transforms them from passive welfare recipients to active decision-makers, facilitating the exercise of political, social, and economic rights. Women in Neighbourhood Groups (NHGs) manage thrift operations, lead community initiatives, and engage in local governance, enhancing their social capital and leadership potential.

However, this empowerment often reinforces traditional caregiving roles, perpetuating a "feminization of responsibility." Women's labor, framed as community duty, shifts poverty alleviation burdens onto them, often without adequate structural support.

6. Rethinking Citizenship

Kudumbashree's achievements and limitations underscore the need to reimagine citizenship beyond patriarchal frameworks. Achieving sex-equal citizenship demands dismantling socio-political structures that tie women's rights to disproportionate obligations. True empowerment lies in an equitable redistribution of rights and responsibilities, ensuring women's agency is neither symbolic nor constrained by systemic inequities.

7. Labelling Theory

Howard Becker's Labelling Theory (1963) provides a critical lens through which to examine the perpetuation of patriarchal structures in Kudumbashree. Labels such as "altruistic" and "selfless", often attached to women's roles in domestic and community settings, serve to normalize and valorize their overwork. By internalizing these labels, women are socialized to conform to societal expectations of being omnipresent, reliable caregivers.

This internalization reinforces the systemic undervaluation of women's labor and entrenches their subservient roles both in the household and in broader community contexts.

8. Mobility Avenues and Patriarchal Bargain

Kudumbashree offers significant avenues for physical and social mobility, particularly for women from marginalized communities. These opportunities for visible socio-economic empowerment, however, often come at the cost of reinforcing patriarchal norms through what Ebaugh (1993) terms the "patriarchal bargain." This compromise allows women to navigate and partially benefit within the constraints of patriarchal structures without fundamentally challenging them. While women gain access to leadership roles and financial resources, their labor is disproportionately relied upon to sustain community welfare initiatives, thereby maintaining the patriarchal status quo.

9. Patriarchal Structures

In Walby's Theorizing Patriarchy (1989), six key structures through which patriarchy operates were identified. This study focuses on three of these: the patriarchal state, patriarchal relations in paid work, and patriarchal relations in culture. These structures reveal the complex interplay of institutional and cultural forces that shape women's experiences within Kudumbashree.

9.1 Patriarchy of the State

State policies and programs, including Kudumbashree, can inadvertently reinforce patriarchal norms and expectations. Walby's framework highlights how states, even while championing women's empowerment publicly, often perpetuate subtler forms of patriarchal control. For example, while Kudumbashree ostensibly empowers women by integrating them into decision-making roles, it simultaneously assigns them the unpaid or underpaid labor of community development, reinforcing traditional gender roles. As Walby asserts, "When patriarchy loosens its grip in one area, it only tightens it in other arenas."

9.2 Patriarchy of Culture

Cultural norms and values, disseminated through media, religion, and education, play a significant role in shaping gender roles and expectations. These norms glorify female altruism and normalize the triple burden of domestic work, childcare, and community service. Within Kudumbashree, this cultural patriarchy manifests in the tacit acceptance of women's labor as a natural extension of their roles as caregivers, further embedding patriarchal ideals in the guise of community participation.

9.3 Patriarchy of Paid Work

The gendered division of labor in the formal economy has direct implications for women's participation in Kudumbashree. Women are often relegated to low-paying, monotonous tasks that align with traditional gender roles, such as tailoring, food processing, or caregiving services. These structural inequalities within Kudumbashree's operational model limit women's ability to access more lucrative or diverse opportunities, thereby perpetuating their economic marginalization.

10. Power, Structure, and Agency

10.1 Power, Structure, and Agency in the Context of Kudumbashree

Giddens' concept of *structuration* and Lash's perspectives on power (Layder, 1985) provide a valuable framework for analyzing the feminization of responsibility and obligation in Kudumbashree. Structuration emphasizes the duality of structure and agency—structures are both the medium and outcome of human action. This dynamic interplay allows women within Kudumbashree to exercise agency, even as they navigate entrenched patriarchal structures.

Women in Kudumbashree operate within a context of structural constraints that delineate their roles and responsibilities, often reinforcing traditional gender norms. These structures, as defined by Layder (1985), represent a set of reproduced social relations that possess enduring qualities. For example, Kudumbashree's operational model positions women as key agents of community welfare, drawing upon their labor for thrift operations, micro-enterprises, and caregiving tasks. While these roles enhance women's visibility in public and economic spheres, they simultaneously reinforce a gendered division of labor.

10.2 Exercising Agency Within Structural Constraints

Despite these constraints, women in Kudumbashree exercise agency by reinterpreting and negotiating the norms that govern their participation. Giddens argues that agency is intrinsically linked to power; through their actions, individuals draw upon and potentially reshape structures. In Kudumbashree, this is evident in the way women utilize collective platforms, such as Neighbourhood Groups (NHGs), to question inequities and assert their interests.

11. Negotiating Structures

- **Confrontation:** Women challenge traditional norms by assuming leadership roles in ADSs and CDSs, leveraging these positions to advocate for community needs and push back against gendered expectations.
- **Navigation:** Some women adapt to the patriarchal bargain by strategically balancing their public responsibilities with private obligations, ensuring they meet societal expectations while carving out space for empowerment.
- **Succumbing:** For many, the weight of structural constraints limits their ability to fully exercise agency, resulting in compliance with gendered labor demands and the perpetuation of symbolic violence.

12. Power Dynamics and Structural Reproduction

Lash's emphasis on the reproduction of structures underscores how Kudumbashree's framework, while transformative in some respects, remains tied to the existing power dynamics of gender. The patriarchal state subtly enforces norms that valorize women's labor without addressing the root causes of inequality. This duality aligns with Giddens' notion that while structures constrain action, they also enable it.

The exercise of agency by women in Kudumbashree does not occur in a vacuum but is shaped by the structural power embedded in societal norms and institutional frameworks. These enduring structures often co-opt women's agency, directing it toward sustaining the very systems they aim to challenge.

13. Time Poverty and Leisure

The feminization of responsibility in Kudumbashree exacerbates what Clair Vickery (1977) termed "time poverty"—a lack of sufficient discretionary time due to the cumulative demands of paid and unpaid labor. Vickery's framework identifies time poverty as a distinct dimension of deprivation that intersects with income poverty, disproportionately impacting women.

In Kudumbashree, women's involvement in NHGs, ADSs, and micro-enterprises often comes on top of their pre-existing responsibilities for domestic work and caregiving. Nearly all interviewed women reported facing time constraints. Women, in particular those with remunerative work found it difficult to regularly attend weekly meetings so much that most Kudumbashree office bearers have relaxed this requirement.

Additional responsibilities have also prevented women from having leisure. A key concept in the Marxist theoretical strand, leisure is considered a basic need for the overall development of the individual and essential for self-actualization.

Hyde et al. (2020) further argue that time poverty is not just an individual burden but a structural issue that undermines women's human rights, health, and sustainable development.

For women in Kudumbashree, the demands of fulfilling community obligations, attending meetings, managing thrift operations, and engaging in livelihood activities leave little room for rest, leisure, or personal development. This relentless cycle of overwork reinforces gendered inequalities, as women's time is systematically devalued and appropriated for the benefit of familial and communal welfare.

Moreover, the normalization of women's time poverty within Kudumbashree aligns with patriarchal cultural norms that valorize female self-sacrifice. As Hyde et al. note, this dynamic has far-reaching implications for women's mental and physical health, limiting their capacity to fully benefit from the socio-economic opportunities provided by programs like Kudumbashree.

While the initiative aims to empower women, its operational model often fails to address the root causes of time poverty, such as the unequal distribution of unpaid labor within households and communities.

The structural nature of time poverty also limits women's ability to exercise agency and participate meaningfully in decision-making processes. As Vickery highlighted, time poverty diminishes the quality of participation by constraining individuals' ability to invest fully in civic and economic activities.

In Kudumbashree, this results in a paradox where women are active contributors to development initiatives but remain trapped in cycles of obligation that hinder their personal and professional growth.

14. Conclusion

Kudumbashree exemplifies a transformative model of grassroots development but raises critical questions about equity and sustainability. True empowerment requires a shift from gendered labor expectations to an inclusive model of development. Engaging men and redistributing responsibilities are essential for achieving the program's transformative potential.

Through the lens of field theory, Kudumbashree emerges as a complex social arena where the feminization of responsibility is both a product of systemic structures and an outcome of women's strategic engagement with the stakes of the field. Addressing this issue requires destabilizing the existing power dynamics and reconfiguring the rules to balance empowerment with equitable responsibility distribution. This theoretical approach provides a robust framework for analyzing and addressing gender inequalities within development programs.

By situating Kudumbashree within the broader discourse of feminist citizenship, this analysis underscores the need for frameworks that go beyond formal equality to address the deeper, systemic inequalities that shape women's experiences as citizens. Only then can initiatives like Kudumbashree transcend the paradox of empowerment through obligation and foster genuine agency and autonomy for all participants.

The interplay of these patriarchal structures highlights the need for a critical examination of how programs like Kudumbashree, while fostering socio-economic mobility, often operate within and reinforce existing gendered hierarchies. To achieve genuine empowerment, it is essential to address these structural and cultural barriers, ensuring that women's agency and labor are not constrained by the very systems claiming to liberate them.

Addressing time poverty within Kudumbashree requires a paradigm shift that prioritizes the equitable redistribution of labor and challenges the cultural norms that glorify women's overwork. Policymakers and program designers must recognize that genuine empowerment involves not only providing opportunities for participation but also ensuring that women have the time and resources to engage meaningfully. Without tackling the structural roots of time poverty, the promise of programs like Kudumbashree will remain limited, perpetuating the very inequalities they seek to dismantle.

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