ISSN (Online): 2455-3662
EPRA International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research (IJMR) - Peer Reviewed Journal
Volume: 12| Issue: 11| November 2026|| Journal DOI: 10.36713/epra2013 || SJIF Impact Factor 2026: 8.753 || ISI Value: 1.188

# SOCIO-ECONOMIC DETERMINANTS OF FEMALE EDUCATION IN KERALA: A HISTORICAL AND SOCIO-CULTURAL ANALYSIS

**Dr. Deepa E**
*Assistant Professor, Department of Economics, Thw Zamorin's Guruvayurappan College, University of Calicut, Kozhikode, Kerala.*

**Article DOI:** https://doi.org/10.36713/epra32068
**DOI No: 10.36713/epra32068**

## ABSTRACT
*Kerala is widely recognised for its remarkable achievements in literacy, education and social development. The state has recorded significant improvements in female literacy over the decades, narrowing the gender gap in educational attainment. However, despite these achievements, women continue to experience various socio-economic and cultural constraints that influence their educational opportunities, economic independence and social status. This article examines the socio-economic determinants of female education in Kerala by considering its historical development, social structure, property relations, gender norms and educational progress. Particular attention is given to the transformation of the traditional matrilineal system, the influence of colonial interventions, land ownership, dowry practices and the relationship between education and women's empowerment. The article also examines literacy and educational enrolment patterns in Kerala, with particular reference to Wayanad and Kozhikode districts. The discussion highlights that improvements in literacy and educational access do not automatically ensure women's autonomy and empowerment. Therefore, a broader understanding of female education requires consideration of economic resources, household decision-making, social mobility and prevailing gender relations.*

**KEYWORDS**: *Female Education, Socio-Economic Determinants, Female Literacy, Gender Inequality, Women's Empowerment, Kerala.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Education is an essential instrument of individual development and social transformation. It plays a significant role in improving women's social status, economic independence and participation in decision-making. Female education contributes not only to individual development but also to the overall progress of society.Kerala occupies a prominent position in India in terms of literacy and educational development. The educational progress of the state is associated with the progressive policies of the former princely states of Travancore and Cochin, the activities of Christian missionaries and the contributions of various social organisations. Government initiatives and educational reforms further strengthened the expansion of educational opportunities.Despite the impressive educational achievements of Kerala, differences in educational opportunities and social status continue to exist among women belonging to different socio-economic backgrounds. Factors such as family income, property ownership, caste, religion, traditional practices, parental attitudes and household responsibilities influence female educational participation.The relationship between female education and empowerment is therefore complex. Although educational attainment has improved considerably, education alone does not necessarily guarantee economic independence or equal decision-making power within the family. Hence, examining the socio-economic determinants of female education is essential for understanding the actual position of women in Kerala.

## 2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

### 2.1 General Objective

To examine the socio-economic and historical factors influencing female education and women's empowerment in Kerala.

### 2.2 Specific Objectives

1. To examine the historical development of female education in Kerala, with special reference to the transformation of the matrilineal system.
2. To analyse the influence of family income, property ownership and landholding on female education.
3. To examine the role of caste, community and traditional social practices in determining women's educational opportunities.
4. To analyse the influence of dowry, marriage customs and family responsibilities on women's social and economic position.
5. To examine the relationship between female literacy, educational enrolment and women's empowerment.
6. To identify the regional differences in female literacy and educational participation, particularly between Wayanad and Kozhikode districts.
7. To examine the limitations of conventional development indicators in explaining gender inequality in Kerala.

## 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Research Design

The study adopts a descriptive and analytical approach to examine the historical, socio-economic and cultural determinants of female education in Kerala.

ISSN (Online): 2455-3662
EPRA International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research (IJMR) - Peer Reviewed Journal
Volume: 12| Issue: 11| November 2026|| Journal DOI: 10.36713/epra2013 || SJIF Impact Factor 2026: 8.753 || ISI Value: 1.188

### 3.2 Study Area

The study focuses on Kerala, with particular reference to Wayanad and Kozhikode districts. These districts are considered for examining differences in female literacy and educational development.

### 3.3 Sources of Data

The study discusses female literacy, educational development, enrolment patterns and socio-economic conditions using the information and statistical data presented in the study. It also draws on previously published studies relating to women's education, matriliny, property rights, gender relations and empowerment in Kerala.

### 3.4 Method of Analysis

The study uses descriptive analysis to examine historical developments, socio-economic factors, social and cultural practices, female literacy, educational enrolment patterns and the relationship between education and women's empowerment.

### 3.5 Scope of the Study

The study examines female education not merely in terms of literacy and enrolment but also in relation to women's economic independence, property rights, household decision-making and social position.

## 4. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF FEMALE EDUCATION IN KERALA

The development of female education in Kerala is closely connected with the historical and social transformation of the state. Modern Kerala was formed in 1956 through the integration of the former princely states of Travancore and Cochin with the Malabar region.

The educational development of Kerala began well before the formation of the state. The enlightened policies of the former rulers, together with the educational activities of Christian missionaries and social organisations, contributed significantly to the expansion of education. The introduction of educational reforms and the Kerala Education Act and Rules further strengthened the institutional framework of education.

Historically, the position of women in Kerala was influenced by different family and inheritance systems. The matrilineal system, particularly among sections of the Nair community, provided women with certain rights relating to ancestral property and family membership. However, the existence of matriliny did not necessarily ensure complete female authority or equality in household decision-making.

Colonial interventions and subsequent legal reforms transformed traditional family structures and inheritance practices. The gradual breakdown of the matrilineal joint family system and the emergence of nuclear and patrilineal family arrangements affected women's property rights, social mobility and economic security.

These historical transformations influenced the development of female education in Kerala. Education increasingly became an important means through which women could seek new livelihood opportunities and improve their social position.

## 5. SOCIO-ECONOMIC DETERMINANTS OF FEMALE EDUCATION

Female educational attainment is influenced by several interconnected economic, social and cultural factors.

### 5.1 Family Income and Economic Background

Family income plays an important role in determining access to education. Economic conditions influence the ability of families to meet educational expenses, including transportation, learning materials and higher education costs.Although Kerala has achieved considerable progress in educational access, the increasing cost of higher education, particularly in self-financing institutions, may create difficulties for economically weaker households.

### 5.2 Property Ownership and Landholding

Property ownership is an important factor influencing women's economic security and social independence. Historically, matrilineal inheritance practices provided certain women with rights over ancestral property.However, changes in inheritance systems and family structures transformed women's access to property and economic resources. Land reforms and the emergence of patrilineal inheritance practices also influenced the distribution of property.

Women's limited control over land and other productive assets can affect their economic independence and educational opportunities.

### 5.3 Caste and Social Background

Caste and community background influence access to educational opportunities. Although Kerala has achieved high literacy levels, differences remain among social groups.Women belonging to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes have historically experienced disadvantages in access to education and other development opportunities. Therefore, general literacy statistics may not adequately reflect the educational conditions of socially marginalised women.

### 5.4 Dowry and Traditional Social Practices

Dowry is another important socio-cultural factor discussed in relation to women's position in Kerala. Traditional expectations surrounding marriage and family responsibilities influence women's economic and social opportunities.The increasing importance attached to dowry can affect the economic position of women and their families. It also demonstrates that higher educational attainment does not necessarily eliminate traditional gender inequalities.

### 5.5 Parental Attitudes and Social Expectations

Family attitudes towards female education influence educational participation and continuation. Social expectations regarding marriage, household responsibilities and women's traditional roles can shape educational decisions.Education may sometimes be viewed as a means of improving marriage prospects rather than as a pathway towards independent employment and economic freedom.

Consequently, the relationship between education, employment and women's autonomy requires careful examination.

ISSN (Online): 2455-3662
EPRA International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research (IJMR) - Peer Reviewed Journal
Volume: 12| Issue: 11| November 2026|| Journal DOI: 10.36713/epra2013 || SJIF Impact Factor 2026: 8.753 || ISI Value: 1.188

## 6. FEMALE LITERACY AND EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN KERALA

Kerala has recorded remarkable improvements in literacy over the decades. According to the statistics presented in the study, the overall literacy rate increased from 47.18 per cent in 1951 to 93.91 per cent in 2011.Female literacy also improved significantly, increasing from 36.43 per cent in 1951 to 92.07 per cent in 2011. The reduction in the gender gap indicates considerable progress in female educational development.

The district-level information presented in the study also highlights variations between Kerala, Wayanad and Kozhikode. Wayanad recorded comparatively lower female literacy than Kozhikode. This difference indicates the importance of examining district-level socio-economic and educational conditions rather than depending exclusively on state-level averages.

## 7. EDUCATIONAL ENROLMENT PATTERNS

The educational enrolment information presented in the study for 2020–21 provides insights into the participation of girls in government, aided and unaided schools.The enrolment data indicate that girls constitute a substantial proportion of the total student population in Kerala. However, differences can be observed across districts and community categories, particularly among Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe students.The representation of girls in government and aided schools also varies between Wayanad and Kozhikode. These differences highlight the importance of examining educational participation among different social groups.Vocational higher secondary education provides additional opportunities for skill development and employment-oriented learning. The data on vocational higher secondary schools indicate variations in the availability of institutions and courses across districts.

Thus, educational infrastructure, institutional accessibility and the availability of different educational programmes are important considerations in understanding female educational participation.

## 8. FEMALE EDUCATION AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

One of the important arguments emerging from the discussion is that educational achievement does not automatically lead to women's empowerment.Traditional indicators such as literacy rates, educational enrolment and health status provide useful information about social development. However, they may not fully explain women's actual position within the household and society.Women's empowerment should also be examined through their participation in household decision-making, control over financial resources, property ownership and freedom of movement.The discussion on the Kudumbashree programme highlights the importance of women's collective participation and economic activities. However, participation in income-generating activities does not necessarily guarantee control over income or independent decision-making.

The distinction between educational access and actual empowerment is therefore important. Education becomes a meaningful instrument of empowerment when women are able to use their knowledge and capabilities to obtain economic opportunities, exercise personal choices and participate in decisions affecting their lives.

## 9. GENDER INEQUALITY AND THE KERALA DEVELOPMENT MODEL

Kerala is frequently recognised for its achievements in human development. However, the concept of the Kerala Model has also attracted criticism because aggregate development indicators may conceal inequalities among different social groups.The gender paradox highlights the contradiction between women's educational achievements and their continuing experience of social and economic disadvantages.Women may achieve higher educational qualifications while simultaneously facing restrictions relating to employment, mobility, property ownership and household decision-making.The studies discussed in the original chapter emphasise that gender inequality operates through different levels, including education, employment, inheritance and family relationships.Therefore, the evaluation of female development should extend beyond conventional statistical indicators and consider women's actual experiences and social positions.

## 10. MAJOR FINDINGS AND OBSERVATIONS

The discussion presented in this article highlights the following observations:

1. Kerala has achieved substantial progress in female literacy and educational development over the decades.
2. Historical developments, including educational reforms and missionary activities, contributed to the expansion of educational opportunities for women.
3. Changes in traditional matrilineal family structures and inheritance practices influenced women's access to property and economic resources.
4. Family income and the increasing cost of higher education are important considerations in educational access.
5. Caste and community differences remain relevant in understanding variations in female literacy and educational participation.
6. Dowry, marriage expectations and traditional gender roles continue to influence women's social and economic position.
7. District-level differences between Wayanad and Kozhikode highlight the importance of region-specific educational analysis.
8. Educational achievement alone does not ensure women's economic independence or household decision-making power.
9. Women's empowerment requires access to economic resources, freedom of movement and meaningful participation in family and community decisions.

## 11. CONCLUSION

Kerala's experience demonstrates that educational development is an essential foundation for social progress and women's advancement. The remarkable improvement in female literacy and educational enrolment reflects the contributions of historical educational reforms, social movements and government initiatives.However, the relationship between

female education and empowerment extends beyond literacy and educational attainment. Socio-economic conditions, property ownership, caste, family income, dowry practices and traditional gender expectations continue to influence women's opportunities and social position.The discussion indicates that educational achievements must be examined alongside women's economic independence, access to resources and participation in decision-making. Special attention should also be given to district-level and community-level differences in educational opportunities.Therefore, promoting female education requires not only expanding access to educational institutions but also addressing the socio-economic and cultural constraints that influence women's educational choices and future opportunities. A comprehensive understanding of these determinants is essential for achieving meaningful gender equality and inclusive development in Kerala.

## 12. REFERENCES

1. *Arunima, G. (2003). There comes papa: Colonialism and the transformation of matriliny in Kerala, Malabar, c. 1850–1940. Orient Longman.ISBN: 9788125025146.*
2. *Kabeer, N. (1999), Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment†. Development and Change, 30: 435-464. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7660.00125*
3. *Kodoth, P. (2008), Gender, Caste and Matchmaking in Kerala: A Rationale for Dowry. Development and Change, 39: 263-283. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7660.2008.00479.x*
4. *Scaria, S. (2014). A dictated space? Women and their well-being in a Kerala village. Indian Journal of Gender Studies, 21(3), 421–449.https://doi.org/10.1177/0971521514540710 EurekaMag*
5. *Sreekumar, S. (2007). The land of 'gender paradox'? Getting past the commonsense of contemporary Kerala. Inter-Asia Cultural Studies, 8(1), 34–54. https://doi.org/10.1080/14649370601118966 Taylor & Francis Online*
6. *Devika, J., & Thampi, B. V. (2011). Mobility towards work and politics for women in Kerala State, India: A view from the histories of gender and space. Modern Asian Studies, 45(5), 1147–1175. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X09000080 Cambridge Core*
7. *Kodoth, P. (2001). Gender, family and property rights: Questions from Kerala's land reforms. Indian Journal of Gender Studies, 8(2). DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/097152150100800209*
8. *Devika, J. (2010). The capabilities approach in the vernacular: The history of Kerala. Economic and Political Weekly, 45(26–27).*
9. *Chacko, E. (2003). Marriage, development, and the status of women in Kerala, India. Gender & Development, 11(2), 52–59. https://doi.org/10.1080/741954317*
10. *Devika, J. & Sukumar, Mini. (2006). Making Space for Feminist Social Critique in Contemporary Kerala. Economic and Political Weekly. 41. 10.2307/4418838.*
11. *Jeffrey, R. (2004). Legacies of Matriliny: The Place of Women and the "Kerala Model." Pacific Affairs, 77(4), 647–664. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40023536*
12. *Tilak, J. B. G. (2016). How is Kerala doing in higher education? Rajagiri Journal of Social Development, 8(1), 3–18. DOI: https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.1.1570.7368*