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ROLE OF SBI CUSTOMER SERVICE POINTS IN PROMOTING WOMEN FINANCIAL INCLUSION IN RURAL KERALA

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of State Bank of India (SBI) Customer Service Points (CSPs) in promoting financial inclusion among rural women in Kerala. While awareness levels for services like account opening and government schemes are moderate to high, actual usage remains largely occasional, primarily focused on withdrawals. Statistical analysis reveals that age, education, and income significantly influence how women interact with CSPs. The findings highlight a strong positive correlation between awareness and usage, suggesting that while CSPs have improved banking access and financial independence, more targeted efforts are needed to convert basic awareness into regular financial participation.

KEYWORDS*: Financial Inclusion, Rural Women, Customer Service Points (CSPs), Business Correspondent Model, Financial Literacy, Kerala.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Financial inclusion has become a major policy priority in India, aiming to provide affordable banking, credit, insurance, and pension services to all, especially underserved groups like rural women who still face barriers to accessing formal financial systems. In this regard, State Bank of India (SBI) has played a vital role through Customer Service Points (CSPs), which operate under the Business Correspondent model as mini-banking outlets managed by local agents. These CSPs offer services such as account opening, deposits, withdrawals, fund transfers, and access to government schemes, thereby extending banking facilities to remote areas and reducing the need for long-distance travel. In rural Kerala, despite high literacy levels, women often encounter socio-cultural and informational challenges that limit their financial participation. By providing accessible and user-friendly services, SBI CSPs help enhance women's financial independence, encourage savings, and improve access to credit and welfare schemes. Additionally, the growing involvement of women as CSP agents has increased trust and comfort among female customers, making CSPs an important mechanism for promoting women's financial inclusion in rural Kerala.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Despite the expansion of financial inclusion initiatives in India, many rural women continue to remain only partially integrated into the formal banking system due to limited awareness, low financial literacy, and socio-cultural constraints. Although SBI has established CSPs to improve accessibility of banking services in rural areas, it is not clear to what extent these services are known, utilized, and beneficial to women. In rural Kerala, where literacy is relatively high but active financial participation among women still varies, there is a need to assess whether SBI CSPs are effectively reaching and serving this group. Therefore, the problem lies in understanding the level of awareness of SBI CSP services among rural women, examining their usage patterns, and analysing the actual impact of these services on enhancing women's financial inclusion and empowerment.

3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND RESEARCH GAP

Financial inclusion in Kerala has improved mainly through banking innovations such as Business Correspondent (BC) models, kiosk banking, and SBI Customer Service Points, though their impact remains moderate and largely limited to basic services. Studies by Shafi (2018) and Shafi and Reddy (2022) show that these systems mainly facilitate account opening and basic transactions in underserved areas, while user preference still leans toward formal banking channels. Jahfarali (2022) further notes that SBI CSPs have improved rural banking access, but operational and institutional challenges reduce their effectiveness.

At the user level, financial inclusion in Kerala is high in access but low in effective usage, especially among rural women. Thomas (2025) and Kishor (2021) find that women often have bank accounts but limited awareness and financial literacy restrict broader service usage, while Thomas (2021) confirms that financial literacy significantly improves inclusion. Gopalakrishnan (2022) highlights that inclusion remains largely transactional despite government schemes and SHG support. Although Kudumbashree and microfinance initiatives improve income, savings, and empowerment (Karikkan & Shahana, 2025; Panackal et al., 2017), their impact is moderate due to training and institutional gaps. Overall, Chetiya (2024) emphasizes that socio-cultural and institutional barriers still limit women's financial empowerment, requiring more targeted interventions.

Although many studies have discussed financial inclusion in Kerala through BC models, kiosk banking, and SHGs, most of them focus on general banking access or service delivery. Studies show that rural women often have bank accounts but

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still have low awareness and limited use of financial services. However, very few studies have specifically examined SBI CSPs and their role in improving women's financial inclusion by studying awareness, usage, and impact together. Therefore, there is a need for a focused study on how SBI CSPs actually influence financial inclusion among rural women in Kerala.

4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To study the level of awareness of CSP services among rural women in Kerala.
2. To examine the level of usage of CSP services by rural women in Kerala.
3. To analyse the impact of CSPs on financial inclusion among women in Kerala.

5. HYPOTHESES OF THE STUDY

The following null hypotheses are set on the basis of objectives:

1. There is no significant difference in the level of awareness of SBI CSP services among rural women across different age groups and educational levels.
2. There is no significant difference in the level of usage of SBI CSP services among rural women across different age groups, educational levels, occupational groups, and income groups.
3. There is no significant relationship between the level of awareness and the level of usage of SBI CSP services among rural women.
4. There is no significant relationship between the level of usage of SBI CSP services and financial inclusion among rural women.

6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study utilizes an analytical and descriptive research design to assess the effectiveness of SBI Customer Service Points (CSPs). Secondary data gathered from research articles and reports was used to establish the literature review and research gap. Primary data was collected from 385 rural women in Kerala using a structured questionnaire distributed through Google Forms. A convenience sampling technique was employed to ensure representation across various age groups, education levels, and occupations. Participants' levels of awareness, usage, and perceived impact were quantified using a 5-point Likert Scale, and the collected data was processed using SPSS software. The analysis involved a multi-faceted statistical approach including descriptive statistics for demographic profiling, One-Way ANOVA to examine differences across demographic groups, Pearson Correlation to identify the link between awareness and usage, and Linear Regression to determine the impact of service usage on financial inclusion.

7. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 - Demographic Profile of Respondents

Sl. No	Variables	No. of Respondents	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
1	**Age Group:**			
	Below 25	62	16.1	16.1
	25–35	134	34.8	50.9
	36–45	138	35.8	86.8
	Above 45	51	13.2	100.0
	Total	**385**	**100.0**	
2	**Education Level:**			
	No Formal Education	6	1.6	1.6
	Primary	75	19.5	21.0
	Secondary	118	30.6	51.7
	Higher Secondary	97	25.2	76.9
	Graduate & Above	89	23.1	100.0
	Total	**385**	**100.0**	
3	**Occupation:**			
	Homemaker	160	41.6	41.6
	Self-employed	102	26.5	68.1
	Agricultural Worker	43	11.2	79.2
	Salaried	56	14.5	93.8
	Others	24	6.2	100.0
	Total	**385**	**100.0**	
4	**Monthly Income:**			
	Below ₹10,000	134	34.8	34.8
	₹10,000–₹20,000	116	30.1	64.9
	₹20,001–₹30,000	70	18.2	83.1
	Above ₹30,000	65	16.9	100.0
	Total	**385**	**100.0**	

Source: Primary Data

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The demographic profile shows that most respondents (70.6%) are in the 25–45 age group, indicating an active working-age population. A majority have secondary or higher secondary education (55.8%), while occupation is dominated by homemakers and self-employed women (68.1%). Majority of respondents (64.9%) belong to lower and middle-income groups earning below ₹20,000 per month, reflecting the socio-economic profile of rural households.

Table 2 - Level of Awareness of SBI CSP Services

Services	Level of Awareness					Total
	Not at all Aware	Slightly Aware	Moderately Aware	Aware	Highly Aware	
Account Opening	24 (6.2)	53 (13.8)	97 (25.2)	136 (35.3)	75 (19.5)	385 (100.0)
Deposits	84 (21.8)	64 (16.6)	104 (27.0)	74 (19.2)	59 (15.3)	385 (100.0)
Withdrawals	48 (12.5)	50 (13.0)	107 (27.8)	121 (31.4)	59 (15.3)	385 (100.0)
Government Schemes	12 (3.1)	63 (16.4)	121 (31.4)	110 (28.6)	79 (20.5)	385 (100.0)
Money Transfer	54 (14.0)	71 (18.4)	88 (22.9)	121 (31.4)	51 (13.2)	385 (100.0)

Source: Primary Data

Note: *Figures in parentheses indicate percentages of total*

The table shows that awareness of SBI CSP services among rural women is generally moderate to high, with account opening and government scheme services showing relatively higher awareness levels. A considerable proportion of respondents are aware of withdrawals and money transfer services, though awareness is more distributed across moderate and aware categories. However, awareness of deposit services is comparatively lower, with a notable share of respondents reporting no or slight awareness, indicating uneven knowledge of different CSP services.

Table 3 - Sources of Awareness of SBI CSP Services

Sources	No. of Respondents	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Friends/Family	113	29.4	29.4
Media	63	16.4	45.7
Bank Staff	74	19.2	64.9
CSP Agent	117	30.4	95.3
Others	18	4.7	100.0
Total	**385**	**100.0**	

Source: Primary Data

The CSP agents (30.4%) and friends/family (29.4%) are the main sources of awareness, followed by bank staff (19.2%) and media (16.4%). This shows that personal and direct contacts play a greater role than media in creating awareness of SBI CSP services.

Table 4 – Level of Usage of SBI CSP Services

Services	Level of Usage					Total
	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Frequently	
Deposit of Money	99 (25.7)	116 (30.1)	70 (18.2)	74 (19.2)	26 (6.8)	385 (100.0)
Withdrawal of Money	85 (22.1)	62 (16.1)	103 (26.8)	105 (27.3)	30 (7.8)	385 (100.0)
Government Schemes	42 (10.9)	91 (23.6)	144 (37.4)	68 (17.7)	40 (10.4)	385 (100.0)
Money Transfer	96 (24.9)	98 (25.5)	67 (17.4)	98 (25.5)	26 (6.8)	385 (100.0)

Source: Primary Data

Note: *Figures in parentheses indicate percentages of total*

The table shows that the usage of SBI CSP services among rural women is generally moderate, with most respondents using services occasionally or rarely. Withdrawals and government scheme services are used more frequently compared to deposits and money transfers, which have higher “never” and “rarely” responses. Overall, the findings indicate that while CSP services are being used, regular and intensive usage remains limited.

Table 5 - Impact of CSPs on Financial Inclusion

Statements	Level of Agreement					Total
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
CSP improved my access to banking	5 (1.3)	77 (20.0)	92 (23.9)	137 (35.6)	74 (19.2)	385 (100.0)
CSP reduced travel to bank	6 (1.6)	136 (35.3)	96 (24.9)	78 (20.3)	69 (17.9)	385 (100.0)
CSP increased my savings habit	4 (1.0)	137 (35.6)	56 (14.5)	83 (21.6)	105 (27.3)	385 (100.0)
CSP improved my financial independence	6 (1.6)	78 (20.3)	108 (28.1)	143 (37.1)	50 (13.0)	385 (100.0)
CSP helped access government schemes	4 (1.0)	155 (40.3)	63 (16.4)	107 (27.8)	56 (14.5)	385 (100.0)

Source: Primary Data

Note: *Figures in parentheses indicate percentages of total*

The table indicates that CSP services have a generally positive but moderate impact on financial inclusion among rural women. Most respondents agree that CSPs improve access to banking, financial independence, and savings habits, although a considerable proportion remain neutral or disagree on certain aspects. However, perceptions are less positive regarding reduced travel and access to government schemes, showing mixed outcomes in practical benefits.

Table 6 - Summary of Hypotheses Testing Results

Sl. No.	Null Hypothesis (H_0)	Statistical Test Applied	Test Statistic & p-value	Decision	Interpretation
1	There is no significant difference in the level of awareness of SBI CSP services among rural women across different age groups.	One-Way ANOVA	$F = 8.420$ $p < .001$	Rejected	There is a significant difference in awareness of SBI CSP services across age groups, indicating that age influences awareness levels.
2	There is no significant difference in the level of awareness of SBI CSP services among rural women with different levels of education.	One-Way ANOVA	$F = 5.245$ $p < .001$	Rejected	There is a significant difference in awareness of SBI CSP services across education levels, indicating that education influences awareness.
3	There is no significant difference in the level of usage of SBI CSP services among rural women across different age groups.	One-Way ANOVA	$F = 14.071$ $p < .001$	Rejected	Usage of SBI CSP services differs significantly across age groups, showing the influence of age on usage.
4	There is no significant difference in the level of usage of SBI CSP services among rural women with different levels of education.	One-Way ANOVA	$F = 8.148$ $p < .001$	Rejected	Usage of SBI CSP services differs significantly across education levels, highlighting the role of education in service utilization.
5	There is no significant difference in the level of usage of SBI CSP services among rural women across different occupational groups.	One-Way ANOVA	$F = 1.500$ $p = 0.201$	Failed to Reject	No significant difference is found in usage across occupational groups, suggesting that occupation does not influence usage.
6	There is no significant difference in the level of usage of SBI CSP services among rural women across different income groups.	One-Way ANOVA	$F = 3.045$ $p = 0.029$	Rejected	Usage of SBI CSP services differs significantly across income groups, indicating that income has a significant influence on the usage.
7	There is no significant relationship between the	Pearson Correlation	$r = 0.855$ $p < .001$	Rejected	A strong positive relationship exists between awareness and

	level of awareness and the level of usage of SBI CSP services among rural women.				usage, indicating that higher awareness leads to greater usage.
8	There is no significant relationship between the level of usage of SBI CSP services and financial inclusion among rural women.	Linear Regression	$R^2 = 0.681$ $\beta = 0.825$ $F = 816.509$ $p < .001$	Rejected	Usage of SBI CSP services has a significant positive impact on financial inclusion among rural women.

8. CONCLUSION

The study concludes that SBI Customer Service Points act as a crucial bridge for financial inclusion in rural Kerala, particularly by making banking more accessible to homemakers and low-income groups. However, a "knowledge-usage gap" exists: women are aware of the services but do not yet use them to their full potential for savings or complex transactions. The rejection of most null hypotheses confirms that demographic factors like education and age are key drivers of financial engagement. To achieve deeper empowerment, SBI should focus on enhancing financial literacy programs and leveraging CSP agents as the primary source of information to build greater trust and encourage regular savings habits among rural women.

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