

Getting Beyond 'Housewife-development'

**An Advocacy Note for the Inclusion of the Needs
and Voices of Informal-Unorganized Urban
Women Workers in Kerala's LSGs.**



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Getting Beyond ‘Housewife-development’: An Advocacy Note for the Inclusion of the Needs and Voices of Informal-Unorganized Urban Women Workers in Kerala’s LSGs.

This note emerged out of a series of discussions among representatives of women’s trade unions in Kerala, activists, researchers, and development activists, along with others who share their concerns, initiated by the Research Unit on Local Self-Government at the Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. Among the workers’ collectives that joined in this exercise, our heartfelt thanks to the leaders of the Asanghadhitamekhala Tozhilali Union, Kozhikode, the leaders of SEWA Kerala, workers who are members of the Mahila Samity of the Purogamana Samskarika Sangham, the laundry workers of Muthalakkulam, Kudumbashree workers from Kozhikode and Thiruvananthapuram, workers who are trans women from Thiruvananthapuram, domestic workers from Thiruvananthapuram, and women workers from the commercial sector. We also remember gratefully women scholars who shared their insights with us: Praveena Kodoth, Neetha N, Meera Velayudhan and Neethi P, particularly. Our thanks also to the local-level development activists from six panchayats and the activists of the Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishat who participated in the discussions.

This note does not have a single author. Or, it is authored by all people who contributed actively to our discussions. Heartfelt thanks to all who helped us in this process.

J Devika

[For the Research Unit on Local Self-Government]

Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram
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Approach

The explicit acknowledgement of women's centrality to the development process in Kerala's local-level development initiatives are by now well-known around the world. Women have been acknowledged in these through increased representation in elected bodies and through setting apart a certain fixed share of resources available to local bodies specifically for women. Yet, after many years, the results of such efforts are still mixed. Women's work participation rates and labour force participation rates are still alarmingly low in Kerala. Also, the opportunities opened up for them in the informal sector have proved to be even disempowering at times. The present state of women workers in the unorganized and informal sectors is not encouraging at all. A considerable number of the families facing extreme poverty, or which face the high risk of impoverishment are those led by women who work in the highly precarious and low paid informal sector. Research into the local bodies' use of funds earmarked for women's development indicates that these women often fall out of the vision of local-level development here. That is, the indication is that women's development at the local-level very often appears to be not women's development but 'housewife-development'. In other words, it is the needs, convenience, and priorities of women who devote themselves to work in and around the family, who are largely economic dependents of their husbands that form the implicit foundation of local-level conceptions of women's development in Kerala's local bodies. Not only is this trend detrimental to women's interests in general, it also does not help to remedy the problem of women's unemployment, widely accepted to be a huge blot on Kerala's development record. This advocacy note is a contribution to the broad effort to bring women into the labour market through making the needs and voices of urban women workers in the informal and unorganized sectors audible to local government authorities.

Introduction

The commitment of Kerala's local self-government to ending gender inequalities, evident since its very inception in the 1990s, has been a matter of pride since then; this has contributed to our sub-national pride too. The significant representation of women in the local bodies, the Women's Component Plan, and the state-wide self-help-group network called Kudumbashree, which now plays a major role in local governance, are most often cited as evidence for this commitment. There can be little doubt that the efforts to secure entry for women to power at the local level and the work that went into building a strong network of self-help groups (SHGs) is entirely commendable. That these efforts threw open doors for less-privileged Malayali women to enter a more public life, which, in the long run, may lead to women gaining greater voice and space in Kerala is indeed beyond question.

But it is impossible to claim unambiguously, in the short run, that these efforts have indeed empowered women here. This is true even when we consider the relative merits of Kerala's achievements – in comparison to the Indian experience in general. For instance, they have not led to the institutionalization of budgeting practices that would definitely empower women and enable the struggle against gendered inequalities in general. In Kerala, 5.5 percent of the state budget was set apart for women's programmes, and this marked the beginning of the gender responsive budgeting exercises here at that level. At this time, 10 per cent of the local body budgets were being set apart regularly for the Women's Component Plan. In the 2010-11 state budget, the share set apart for women went up to 8.5 percent. But the changes in government across elections and other factors denied continuity to the process. In 2011, the Fourth Finance Commission extended statutory recognition to gender responsive budgeting and sought to strengthen the Women's Component Plan. Despite this, progress has been tardy, as recent studies show (Nisha and John 2018).

In the 1990s, certain spaces were created for women in local development, which included those for special groups to discuss gender issues in the village sabhas, ward sabhas, and development seminars. A special task force for women's development projects, gender impact statements, a special chapter for women's projects in the development report – all these held up the hope of transforming gender relations in local-level development. However, in practice, much of these failed, or materialized inadequately. In any case, these spaces did not develop into places in which creative thinking about gender-inequality-free development. Today, women's development at the local level is still perceived largely to be self-help projects and micro-credit.

This makes us wonder whether the slogan about making women participants in development did not actually refer to housewives, and not women in general. Recent research seems to yield evidence that confirms this suspicion. Most of these indicate despite women's falling work- and labour force participation in Kerala, women workers do not receive much attention in local level development. Though considerable resources are being devoted to encouraging self-help activities among housewives, the results are still quite mixed. The labour market, however, is ever-more unstable, very laborious, and poorly remunerative for women (George 2013 , Neethi 2015). From this perspective, it is clear the women's development projects – as well as others – are not designed to address the needs and issues of women workers in general.

The crucial importance of women's entry into the workforce for Kerala's development needs to be fully recognized and re-emphasized, for the reason that this matters not just for women

but also for Kerala's economy in general. Surely, this matters vitally for poverty alleviation, precisely because there seems evidence that shows that women in the informal-unorganized sector and their families are at greater risk of impoverishment (for example, Devika et al 2011). Besides, a recent study on funding for women-friendly development at the state and local-levels in Kerala indicates a downward trend (Nisha and John 2018). Between 2007 and 2010, the areas in which funds meant for women's development were spent included house construction for women beneficiaries from women-headed households (nearly 60 percent in 2007), training for self-help economic activities, and marriage expenses (ibid.). Poor availability of data in the government's official websites hampers serious inquiry into these trends too.

There is little doubt that this benefitted housewives primarily. Very often, the larger share is spent on helping the Kudumbashree's activities (Scaria 2014). While this may not be negative in itself, and women workers too may receive a share of resources in their capacity as providers of households, at least some of this spending may have had unintended negative effects on women workers. For example, the inadequate support for housing may actually trap women workers in huge debt. This has enormous implications in an economy in which land forms the single most valuable asset and therefore even tiny plots of land are coveted by banks.¹ The nature and size of plans and resources meant for women at different levels of the government are often of this sort – which yield differential benefits to different groups of women, some of which may impact poor women negatively. This appears all the more important in the context of the devastation wreaked by the recent floods and landslides – women's relief has been, till recently, largely imagined in terms of interest-free loans and subsidized domestic implements. Women's voices in development however been emphasizing the crucial need for paid work. There is, however, also evidence that when local level interventions encourage women to perform work for wages, this has important impacts on market wages for women and enhanced savings – this has been noted for the MNREGS in Kerala (Sudarshan et al 2010).

Women from Kerala's coastal villages have been migrating to the Gulf countries for work since the 1950s at least. They have however remained largely invisible because 'respectable' femininity in these areas demand married status. Despite their much larger incomes and the fact that these women contributed very heavily to the upward mobility of their families,

¹ See, for instance, <https://scroll.in/article/873642/cheated-by-moneylenders-dalits-in-kerala-fight-against-law-used-to-evict-them-from-their-homes>, Accessed, 15 May 2018.

at least till late-1980s (until recruitment agencies became widespread), they were mostly unnoticed. Many of these women face severe isolation and neglect within the very families that benefitted from their labour. Their earnings have been transformed into large homes for the family and spent on education of male members; many have little left of their savings, and are woefully dependent on male relatives; many are still heavily stigmatized. More recently, women who seek to migrate for work under a regime that makes such migration very difficult are prey to unscrupulous agents. Because of this, the costs of migration are higher for women and the benefits are fewer. Yet, because in these poor communities the huge burden of family maintenance often falls wholly on the women, they still seek to go. It is no coincidence that more than half of the women who try to migrate are widows, unmarried, or abandoned by their husbands. In her interviews with women workers who migrated, Praveena Kodoth noted that they felt compelled to justify their decision to migrate citing unpleasant family environment (Kodoth, personal communication). If only respectable and adequately-paying jobs were available here, these women may not have felt the compulsion to take the illegal route to migrating abroad for work.

The broader contexts of these developments is the shift evident in Kerala's labour scene in the 1990s, in which the organized-formal sector male worker was replaced by the self-help oriented housewife in the discourse of government welfare, thus indicating a shift in the regime of empowerment (Devika and Thampi 2007). Their role, and specifically, the nature of their labour and exploitation under the new liberalization and globalization-fuelled capitalism here, was not seriously theorized from the left of the political spectrum. This new agent of development was ushered only too easily, into the category of 'woman' even by the dominant left in Kerala. A consequence that followed this shift was that the woman worker was rendered rather invisible and inaudible: there was little talk of their needs, interests, and voices from the mainstream left even as Kerala's first women's trade union, SEWA Kerala, continued to mark its presence and voice its critique. In the mainstream left, the 1980s had seen much greater interest in women workers, and there were prominent women leaders there who worked to protect their interests and make visible the forms of labour women engaged in the public. However, these voices were largely ignored in the 1990s and the government's focus came to be the housewife engaged in self-help activities as the new agent of development. This was probably in the wake of the global phenomenon that Sassen (2000) calls the 'feminisation of survival'.

Recent research also shows that women workers may not fully benefit from the Kudumbashree (Scaria 2014). There is acknowledgement that the Kudumbashree has been less successful in addressing the problems of Adivasi women, but the problem persists

among outlier communities living among Kerala's cultural mainstream too (Scaria 2014, Devika 2016, Aaberg 2018). For example, Scaria's research in Wadakanchery shows that the Kudumbashree there caters mostly to housewives and it is adjusted to their needs and conveniences. The women left out are the extremely disadvantaged women workers many of who can scarcely afford to pay their weekly deposits. Devika's study shows how the economic activities facilitated through self-help after the mid-1990s ban on country liquor have been woefully less than the opportunities lost by poor women who brewed liquor in a city slum in Kerala (2016). Aaberg's study indicates that though the Kudumbashree has helped to cushion the decline in welfare received by poor unskilled market-workers in an urban area, the burden of welfare now fell on their wives who took loans from Kudumbashree; he also observes that the poorest women continue to remain unable to access the benefits of Kudumbashree (2018). It is hardly surprising that most of the women thus excluded are dalit and labourers in the informal sector.

Here we raise the question of spending funds earmarked for women's development at the local level in ways that benefit women workers and address their special needs. In the discussions around the Thirteenth Five-Year Plan, government spokespersons have raised the need to have gender responsive budgeting at the local level. The recommendation is that such budgeting take into account the varied needs of women of different socio-economic backgrounds. In other words, there is now the possibility of gender responsive budgeting and other kinds of planning which takes into account the needs of not merely housewives, but also women workers and transwomen workers.

This lobby note may be considered a contribution to the above effort. The Thirteenth Plan document gives emphasis to developing women's skills and employment opportunities, and importantly, livelihood security of women at greater risk of poverty and other social disadvantages. Given this, it is important to pressurize for adequate attention to the issues and needs of women who are already in the workforce who are vulnerable. In other words, this is a good opportunity to get past the currently-dominant conservative approach in the Women's Component Plan and other women-focused development efforts of 'provide resources to housewives/women' and fully actualize a more progressive approach that aims at getting women to the labour market and making it a hospitable place for them.

There is of course the vitally important question whether women in the local government-funded self-help activities, and women in Kudumbashree who carry out development work in the local body, are not themselves workers and whether they should not be regarded as such. This is work that remains almost completely imperceptible within the discourse of

self-help and entrepreneurship. There is good reason from research around the world that these may perhaps be regarded as new forms of labour that women do (or as new versions of older forms of petty production poor women were already engaged in) – and even as women’s perceptions of their public life need to be heard and understood, the nature of their work may also be discerned against the background of the broader politico-economic context.

In the chapter on Gender in the Thirteenth Plan document of the Kerala State Planning Board prepared by the Gender Working Group, considerable importance is given to issues faced by women workers in the informal sector (WGGD 2017). Many observations made in it are of key significance. First, it notes that women of the age group 15-29 are rarely in the workforce. Therefore, it appears that the larger share of women workers also carry family burdens. Because no women are able to enter the labour market – their time and mobility may be deeply restricted. When livelihood is mainly marriage and not paid work, the probability of suffering domestic violence is more likely to increase. There is evidence from recent research that in heavily-disadvantaged communities, marriage as it happens now may increase women’s insecurities and instabilities (Abraham and Devika 2014).

If one reviews present practices from this standpoint, many familiar measures may seem quite contrary to women’s long-term wellbeing. For example, the support for marriage expenses from funds earmarked exclusively for women may actually be a case of mis-spending or mal-spending, since marriage does not seem to be guaranteeing the welfare of women, and especially of the poor. Women are often found seeking work not from a position of strength, but weakness – following widowhood or desertion by husbands, or in the face of domestic violence. It is clear that entry into the labour market from a position of weakness heightens the possibility of getting trapped in low paid, laborious, low-skilled work. The chapter on gender in the Thirteenth Plan document also mentions how women in the industrial sector remain invisible solely because they are in informal work (WGGD 2017).

The chapter also discusses the issues of urban women workers. It touches upon how women workers in the commercial sector are denied even fundamental rights and how several injustices including sexual harassment rarely receive any visibility. Poor wages, denial of adequate rest, no guarantee of fixed working hours are common, and employers often violate all labour laws with impunity. Because their names do not figure in the employment register women workers do not receive even limited welfare benefits (WGGD 2017). The backdrop is of course the vast expansion of the commercial sector in Kerala, the exit of male workers because of low wages, and the intensification of the demand for ‘feminine’ skills and

demeanour in these jobs. There can be little doubt today that many women hesitate to enter the job market because it is utterly inhospitable for women and therefore it is necessary to address the issues faced by women in the informal and unorganized sectors urgently.

The condition of transwomen workers, who are mainly in informal jobs, is abysmal, as evident from the many transwomen's testimonies in the media. The woes of transwomen who could not retain 'respectable' if low-paid jobs because social stigma prevents them from finding reasonably-affordable accommodation have been widely discussed in the Malayalam press – and it appears that middle-class and educated transwomen who have the social capital to deal with stigma are more successful than others in keeping those opportunities.² In the public, they face shocking levels of violence and harassment. In other words, they face the exploitation endured by cis-gendered women workers, as well as the social stigma against workers, but both these are much more intense, and with the additional burden of transphobia.

It is beyond question that the role of the local self-governments in securing the lives of women workers in the informal and unorganized, as well as self-help sectors. But it is also clear that their failings are many. For example, in the Teeramaitri project aimed at coastal fish vendor women, though the women were given air-conditioned vehicles to transport their products, local governments did not permit them to vend these products from their vehicles by the wayside (WGGD 2017). Another example is of domestic workers and care workers in general. The security and well-being of these workers is best secured by the elected and constitutionally-mandated government at the local-level. Monitoring by the police tends to favour the employer. It is the nerve-centres of local democracy, the local governments, that ought to monitor from the side of the workers.

One of the studies mentioned earlier note that the worst spender of funds for women's development is the city corporation (Nisha and John 2018). This is of importance to our discussion, because it precisely in heavily urbanized, or peri-urban areas that informal sector opportunities including those in the commercial sector seem to be opening up for women. Also, today, the struggles of women workers in the commercial sector against exploitation and oppression in Kerala are also unfolding in such places. The more imaginative use of resources by the city corporations, both of funds for women's development and general funds, may indeed help to alleviate the severity of this exploitation. It is true that dealing

² See <https://yourstory.com/2018/01/nine-months-later-transgenders-employed-at-kochi-metro-say-things-are-moving-on-the-right-track/> accessed, 16 May 2018.

with such exploitation effectively would require much deeper changes – for example, it is necessary to rework the Shops and Establishments Act and the Contract Labour Act in ways that address the specific injustices suffered by workers in the informal sector. There is also little dispute that much in-depth change cannot be expected unless the whole state apparatus, especially the labour department and its modes and priorities of functioning, are not restructured in fundamental ways. But there are measures that can and should be taken at the local level too. For example, urban local bodies are doubtless, likely to be more relevant and effective as institutions when it comes to addressing the issues of transwomen workers. This is because after they gained legal recognition, members of this community have tried to move to more urbanized areas in a bid to escape intense transphobia and isolation they face in their home-places.

It is necessary to discuss in detail the possibilities of policy- and practical project-making advanced by the chapter on gender in the Thirteenth Plan document. The chapter suggests four broad policy thrusts:

- (1) Special social security programmes for women workers.
- (2) Given that women workers in Kerala bear caring responsibilities, make available affordable and accessible high-quality caring facilities.
- (3) Ensure dignified working conditions and minimum wages.
- (4) Provide adequate transport facilities and ensure both their security and freedom.

This advocacy-note takes up each of these broad suggestions to reflect on how they might be translated into local governance in Kerala at present.

We wish to assert at the very outset that we call for a fully rights-based approach to women workers' welfare, as differentiated from a dole-oriented welfarism. The shift of political agency from trade unions to local-level governments need not necessarily be accompanied by a diminution of workers' rights. This is especially so for Kerala. Given the historical legacy of Kerala's politics of the 20th century in which welfare was claimed by a militant left as essentially a right, local governments should rightly become the guardians of workers' rights and not just welfare-distribution centres. The Women's Component Plan is indeed the right of women here and not the charity of the state. Also, observers from the mainstream left have claimed that decentralized governance in Kerala was a continuation of Kerala's

legacy of democratization through public action (Isaac and Franke 2000). If so, there is every reason to demand that local governments become the new rallying points for politics to secure workers' rights.

All available studies about informal sector women workers point to the need to look beyond just the workplace – to their lives in the family, neighborhood, and community spaces. This indicates that demands cannot be limited just to employers, especially given the fact that informality now is easier for them because of state- and national level laws that have amended the labour laws. Intervening at the level of local governance represents a shift in making demands to and claims upon the state. We make these claims from women workers' unions in alliance with others thereby exercising the agency of women workers – and for this reason, this is not extending welfare-as-dole. This of course does not mean that the critique of current welfarism as producing passive beneficiaries should be shelved altogether – certainly, it is true that sections of people who are marginal to or outside the capitalist market, such as the dalits, adivasis, coastal peoples and so on are reduced to passive beneficiaries by the present system. However, this critique does not imply that any form of claims-making by disadvantaged sections, such as informal sector women workers, is impossible at present.

In the context of the massive losses suffered by the state in August 2018, these issues become all the more relevant. Like anywhere else in the world, poor women in Kerala have been the most affected among sufferers. For this reason, it becomes all the more necessary to enable their economic independence.

Advancing Innovative Ideas at the Local Level

This lobby-note advances concrete proposals based on the broad suggestions of the chapter on gender in the Thirteenth Plan document. We are aware that many of these require action from different agencies and different levels, and may not be immediately practical at the local level. However, in the new guidelines for local level planning, there is clear encouragement for relevant and innovative ideas that address the needs of diverse social groups. Worry about the ineffective use of the Women's Component Plan continues to be expressed by those who are closely involved in the planning process. This is in the backdrop of the by-now common attempts to pass off general needs as women's special needs, and the use of women's development funds unimaginatively that innovative ideas receive support now from authorities.

The discussion of ideas below about the use of special funds for women and welfare programmes in general is based on three broad observations:

1. It is necessary to move away from development policies and programmes that regard women as primarily and mainly as 'housewives' – mainly engaged in unpaid domestic labour and unpaid productive work around the home, and as a matter of womanly duty.
2. Development at the local level needs to be reviewed and redone so as to be beneficial for women and transwomen who work, who seek work. This is not only for the well-being of these groups but is also vital to Kerala's economy as a whole.
3. Development at the local level must necessarily be oriented towards attracting women and transwomen towards the labour market.

1. *The Importance of the Local Level*

- The problem of assessing the numbers of women workers in the informal sector is not easy to resolve. This makes it all the more important to locate efforts to prepare welfare proposals aiming at them at the local level. As a preliminary step, it is necessary to collect information about women workers at the ward-level through the Kudumbashree network under the supervision of the local Community Development Society (CDS). However, it is well-known that it is not easy for informal sector workers to provide proof of one's work status. Also, precisely because much work in the informal sector is stigmatized, workers may be reluctant to reveal their work status. Secondly, it is necessary to also get a sense of the numbers of women at the local level who may wish to work for wages even though they are not working now.

The solution to these difficulties lies perhaps in setting up a register at the local level of all women workers and women who seek/desire work, without consideration of age. The registration form for such a register should be prepared under the aegis of state-level supervisory or training institutions, like the Kerala State Planning Board or KILA in consultation with women workers' trade unions in the state and scholars who have explored women's work. The best way would be to organize widespread publicity through a campaign for the register, its aims, the mode of registration, eligibility and so on through Kudumbashree ward-level structures and trade unions, and then encourage women to register voluntarily. The gender resource centres that are being set up in the village panchayats could be perhaps made use of for this. The possibility of developing a simple-to-use online application to facilitate registration could also be considered.

The possibilities of this registration drive go beyond a mere enumeration. It is possible that the registration campaign could also be made into an occasion for widespread discussion about the importance of easing women's entry into the labour market. Equally interesting is the possibility of Kudumbashree and trade unions working together actively to produce an empowering discourse around women entering the workforce. These are likely to make women's work more visible and increase its respectability – and besides, it becomes abundantly evident that it is not the police that should be following domestic and care workers but the local bodies which are the chief guardians and sources of democracy at the local level.

- Women in paid domestic work often suffer a great deal of stigma in society. Many of them hesitate to reveal their work status. They also sometimes remain reluctant to seek work openly and widely. Because of this they are often saddled with poor options – low wages and fewer opportunities. For this reason, they need special consideration. These difficulties make it important to maintain confidentiality in the registration process for domestic and care workers and women seeking such work.
- A number of agencies now recruit women for domestic work all over Kerala. As a beginning of the process of bringing them under the scrutiny of the local government, the latter should initiate a conversation with them.
- Help may be sought from the transgender justice board with registering transwomen workers and transwomen seeking work.
- It is important to recognize that the aim of this register is not merely to count numbers. To the contrary, it is an instrument to recognize and mobilize women who work for wages and seek/desire waged work as a social group in itself. It is indeed a necessary precondition for the securing of a fair share of resources as a prominent sub-group within the category of Women.
- Secondly, the effort to unseat the enthronement of 'housewife-development' should begin necessarily at the local level. First of all, a review of the structure, functioning, and powers of the Kudumbashree (KS) and the utilization of women's development funds by the local body from the perspective of women workers/women who seek or desire work needs to be undertaken. This could be facilitated by the active involvement of women's trade unions. That is, the regular activities of the basic self-help groups, including timing and frequency of meetings, division of responsibilities and opportunities, thrift-collection and so on as well as higher-level decisions on

loan schemes and allocation, entrepreneurial opportunities, and benefits need to be assessed and redone to also benefit women workers and women seeking work. Secondly, all activities of the KS may also be made to require a statement similar to Gender Impact Statements, that shows how they will benefit 'housewives' and women and transwomen who are in paid work in families equally. Thirdly, when trainings are planned in the KS at the lower levels, special get-togethers of women and transwomen in paid work should be organized for consultation to ascertain their demands and needs – in other words, direct involvement in the lower-level planning of major KS activities by women in paid work must be encouraged. Particularly, in the activities of the resource organization of the National Urban Livelihood Mission, consulting women workers who are thus registered at the CDS level about desired and appropriate skill trainings could be useful. This may make the urban livelihood centres and skill-development training more effective. This is now aimed at improving the condition of economically disadvantaged workers already; special emphasis needs to be given to women workers in informal-unorganized work.

- Also, while deciding incentives for neighbourhood groups such as revolving funds, groups in which women workers form a certain share of the membership and all-women worker groups should be granted priority. This could be included in the criteria for allowing revolving funds.
- In all projects meant for wayside vendors, active participation of their organizations must be ensured. The participation of their representatives which is made mandatory in the Town Vending Committees and other forums must be realized fully and women's presence as well. Surveys and other data collection must be necessarily entrusted to local Kudumbashree women members. Beyond granting women vendors the status of an oppressed sub-group in the Urban Wayside Vendor Document and in projects aimed at them, local bodies need to initiate a closer examination of the gender dimensions of wayside vending in their areas. The space for intervening effectively in issues raised by women and transwomen vendors must be cleared directly in these projects.
- It needs to be reiterated here that the review suggested above must be conducted in such a way that it does not, inadvertently, lead to the 'housewifeization' of women workers. For example, small sums are offered by many local bodies to cover marriage expenses of young women from poor families. But there is much research that actually shows the unequal marriage is a key reason that prevents women from entering the job market. No much evidence needs to be amassed to prove that marriages based on the

unilateral transfer of resources from the woman's family to the man's – dowry-based marriages – tend to be unequal. From this perspective the familiar marriage-support grants common in our local bodies need to be discouraged. This does not mean that they should be ended fully. If necessary, they should be from general, and not women's development funds. Getting married is surely neither the need nor responsibility of the bride or her mother – and women – alone.

In other words, the focus of the review should be on whether the funds earmarked for women's development by the local bodies are being devoted to securing the interests of women and transwomen workers and not just helping them fulfill social expectations of housewifely duty, to whether their utilization is enabling their entry into the labour force.

- Thirdly, new ways to ensure the full participation of women and transwomen workers in local level deliberation must be opened. All women registered as engaged in, seeking/ desiring work in the ward must be given direct notice of the ward and other sabhas and special effort must be made to ensure their participation, especially by consulting them earlier on convenient timing. In the Village Sabhas, women who are in work and seek/ desire work must be allowed to sit as a single group instead of remaining confined in their wards – and such practices as this must be institutionalized. Planning sabhas must necessarily be organized with the full involvement of local trade unions, women's trade unions, and women workers listed in the register. Special time should be allotted for discussion of their issues.
- Fourthly, under the aegis of the jagratha samithy and the gender resource centres, there should be a yearly awareness programme for women workers about their rights and legal entitlements and an assessment of the risks they face, and about sexual harassment at the workplace. Helping women workers facing such issues at the workplace to file complaints and take the process forward should be included among the official responsibilities of the jagratha samithy and the gender resource centre. The gender resource centres should be tasked with setting up Local Complaints Committees to which women workers can make complaints about sexual harassment at work.
- Fifthly, women workers may be brought together at the ward level by the Coordinator of the Gender Resource Centre or a member of the committee in charge of it for the smooth and quick exchange of vital information and also for sharing messages on issues of relevance to women workers.

2. *Special Welfare Projects for Women and Trans Women Workers, Security, Mobility*

- Extend the present welfare benefits available to Kudumbashree members in particular panchayats to senior women workers and transwomen workers, for example, free medical supplies. It must be remembered that senior women workers and transwomen are less likely to be active participants in the Kudumbashree network.
- The highest priority in welfare projects aimed at women workers should be given to health. The work they engage in is laborious and prolonged and so special effort to protect their health is called for. The health camps organized by the local bodies and Kudumbashree are often unused by women workers who work away from their localities. Therefore it may be pertinent to organize a special clinic for them at regular intervals at a local government medical facility, the timings and dates of which may be decided through a consultation with potential users. Women workers usually lose a day's wages when they seek medical care; the local body could fix a suitable compensation for this for older women workers (aged above 55). It must be remembered that among women workers in the informal sector, many are really senior women, and this must be given special consideration.
- Women return-migrant workers also often face very severe health challenges and lack the resources to deal with them effectively. Return migrants now receive benefits for ten years after they return; this period should be extended for women migrant workers who return taking into account the fact that they often do not control their own incomes and could be hugely dependent on others.
- Set up welfare fund for women workers who lead and provide for their households single-handedly to support children orphaned in the event of their death.
- The support for housing available now prioritizes women (worker)led households, but not only is it inadequate, often, it leads these families into an unending cycle of debt. Because the resource base of such families is inevitably fragile, even small crises can shatter them. Unexpected expenses for health care or social obligations often lead even to loss of housing. Because land in urban areas is notoriously expensive women workers especially domestic workers, are forced to pay exorbitant rent to stay closer to work. Besides, women who work long hours away from home face other problems too. Generally, it is the safety concern about children and teenagers that often keep women away from paid work. Today, incidents of children who stay alone at home after school being subjected to violence and/or exploitation are commonly heard in Kerala.

In other words, it seems evident that women workers cannot hope to stay stable in work without adequate housing. Without proper housing, it may be impossible to make sure that women will remain steadily in the labour market. As far as transwomen are concerned, this is a terrible lack. It was a major reason why many of them who were employed in the Kochi Metro had to leave their jobs. Transwomen who suffer stigma and who are often thrown out of their families, find it difficult to find affordable accommodation in a society that stigmatizes them cruelly.

Considering the above issues, there needs to be a major shift in the fundamentals of housing provision at the local level: what is required is not support for individual homes for individual families through self-help, but housing complexes built by the local bodies closer to urban centres of work and allocated to women-worker-led families on low rents, on a long-term basis. The criteria for allocation should include not just led women-led status but also those of caste, age, differently-abled, and gender minority status. This makes it possible for women workers not just to avoid exorbitant rents but also organize collective arrangements for childcare and security, and be rid of the threat of eviction. However, care must be taken to ensure that such settlements must be planned in transparent and democratic ways, and that it should not mean automatic resettling of workers to the outskirts of urban/urbanized areas. The settlements also need to be planned in ways that ensure that they will not be dilapidated slum-like environments.

The National Urban Livelihood Mission's housing programme for the urban homeless does advance this idea. It also envisages informal sector workers' unions as possible agencies to undertake the management of such complexes must be planned especially for informal sector women workers – not as the shelter provided by the government for those are homeless and needy but as workers' rights and necessary for the economic well-being of the city. They must be imagined not as shelters but as places that will necessarily be shaped by the new working class community. In Kerala where the urban-rural gap has been narrowing steadily, this has relevance well beyond cities.

3. *Care Facilities*

- Because the larger share of women who work and seek work in the informal sector bear family responsibilities, unless the burdens of caring for the aged and the young are reduced, the prospect of their entering the labour market remains decidedly dim. Women who are already workers may not be able to stay there on a regular basis. The broader shift in our perceptions of childhood and child care today makes the

supervision of teenagers a fully maternal responsibility. Therefore, the common suggestion, for crèches, may not be sufficient.

- It is possible perhaps to improve care facilities through an expansion of Anganwadis, but this may involve many practical difficulties. The work-burdens of Anganwadi workers, the paucity of space etc. are commonly mentioned. Therefore it may be important to explore if setting up and running complexes composed of crèches, day-homes for the elderly, and play spaces for teenagers can be included in Kudumbashree's livelihood promotion activities and the necessary training for it supported by the National Urban Livelihood Mission. Women workers and wayside vendors should be able to access these facilities at lower rates.
- The land/physical space for such complexes may be a problem given rising rents and poor availability of affordable land. The feasibility of using grounds and buildings that may be relatively unused in government schools in localities could perhaps be considered.
- Transwomen should be given equal opportunities and resources to open such care complexes.
- It may be beneficial to include the caring labour in such complexes in the activities of the MNREGS. This is of particular significance in Kerala's context. The beneficiaries of MNREGS here are usually poor women. The necessary training for this could be provided through the skill-development programme. These trainings should be done formally in technical institutions to train women also for better care activities – physiotherapy, palliative care, equipped pre-school educators, youth educators, yoga teachers etc. to meet the needs of the ageing populations.
- Projects to ensure the security of women workers' minor children may be launched. Very often, women seek paid labour when they face severe domestic violence and/or neglect in their families. There is a crying need for children in such circumstances, for short-stay homes, set up perhaps by Kudumbashree or the Kerala Mahila Samakhya – or under the supervision of women's trade unions -- where they could be protected from emotional and physical violence and neglect – when mothers have to work away from their localities to provide economic security. This is particularly important for care workers who may have to leave their young children and teenagers for weeks or months.

- Make available counseling services for families facing domestic crises over women's work, through gender resource centres.
- The gender resources centre could also be used to make available legal advice and help to women workers free of cost and conduct awareness programmes on labour laws and sexual harassment at workplace.
- Care facilities must be necessarily made available in places close and accessible for women workers. If there is a concentration of women workers in any part of the city, and if a certain number of them demand a crèche-day-home-play-space complex, the city government must be bound to providing this within a reasonable distance of the workplace. Such needs should find a key place in the project-making processes of all local governments.
- It is important to recognize that not just Kudumbashree workers, but also Kudumbashree entrepreneurs are indeed working women or workers themselves, who deserve social provisioning in recognition of their contribution to the national product. The above facilities need to be made available to them at subsidized cost and accessibly.

4. *Dignified Working Conditions, Minimum Wages*

- As far as women workers in informal work are concerned, wages and dignified working conditions are the most important issues. The denial of basic needs like toilet facilities even after prolonged struggles is most regrettable indeed. Clean and free toilet facilities, a proper rest room for meals and breaks, and decent behaviour from employers and supervisors – it is the absence of such basic conditions that often alienate women from the workplace.

Much of this can be alleviated by local governments. For example the lack of toilets (for women and transwomen) is fully remediable through them. Local women workers can easily suggest places where they need to be ensured. The rest rooms may also be set up with the employers and local governments working together. Local governments can also be launch-pads for campaigns for dignified behaviour towards female employees and workers. Once a year, a compulsory awareness workshop on women workers' rights for employers could be made mandatory. This could be conducted with support from the IIMs, universities, and Business Schools. There is no claim that such campaigns and awareness will resolve the issue – the idea is to make it clear whose side the government is on. These could come under the innovative projects supported now by the new local level development guidelines.

- Besides the above, there should an effort to initiate public opinion-building for actualizing equal wages for equal work and job security.
- Many shops especially textile shops, are notorious for making women workers stand for eight or more hours, and despite this being an issue widely debated in public through the efforts of women’s trade unions and a recent favourable order from the government, no respite seems to be near in many places. The LSG needs to urgently intervene in this by forming a committee comprising of women elected members, Kudumbashree leaders, and representatives of women workers’ trade unions and other trade unions, who must be empowered to conduct inspections (without necessarily waiting for complaints), and mediate to ensure humane working conditions.
- The other major difficulty women workers in the informal sector face is the instability of their employment. Very often, this lands them in such severe financial crisis that they may be unable to even seek fresh employment. There are instances in which the worker actually gave up seeking work altogether. There should be collective reflection on what local governments may be able to do to prevent this. Women and transwomen workers who are registered in the local body as workers, if they lose their jobs, could be granted a small allowance per day for a short period (of two or three months – similar to the MNREGS period) to help them seek new work. This will keep the search for work alive.
- At present, the work opportunities that open up for women in the apartment complexes and large public buildings springing up all over Kerala are mostly exploited by for-profit employment agencies which do not pay women workers a minimum wage and actually even extract a commission from them. Domestic workers are especially affected by this. The local body ought to secure these opportunities for local women who may be seeking work. Women who have registered in the local body could be recruited for these opportunities through the local body, which should mediate between them and the employers to guarantee minimum wages and decent working conditions. The local body could offer incentives to employers for this – through tax concessions. Or, it could make such compliance mandatory for the grant of certificates etc. to the builders and housing societies. It should also make sure that irrespective of who gets employed, the workers are paid minimum wages.
- In many of the local bodies, Kudumbashree women perform a considerable amount of labour receiving nominal remuneration. Official or unofficial, this work remains poorly remunerated and often poorly recognized as well (projected as ‘service’).

Kudumbashree leaders are particularly the informal workers, partly at least, of the development sector today. The labour they perform for the government ought to be remunerated with minimum wages. Today, many dedicated Kudumbashree women spend money from their pockets to carry out this labour despite being poor. This injustice should end; they should be paid minimum wages on the days in which they labour for the local body. This can bring many benefits, for example, make it clear that the local government is itself committed to minimum wages for women. The petty corruption at the bottom will be reduced. It may be impractical to pay monthly salaries to Kudumbashree women workers, but minimum wages for the days of work they put in is indeed their right.

- Many of the self-help ventures that women have been encouraged to take up recently pose the danger of leading them into a debt-trap. Again, it needs to be remembered that these self-help entrepreneurs are also often workers in their own enterprises and they have to put in very long hours of extremely hard labour to secure even slim profit. Even if they manage to avoid debt, they are under the risk of severe health challenges. In the case of large ventures like malls and hotels that women are being encouraged to open, if the local government provides the building and basic infrastructure and then rents out the space on rent to Kudumbashree entrepreneurs, they may tide over debt better.
- A group of urban workers who need urgent attention are the urban solid-waste collectors who were encouraged to enter it as entrepreneurs. They however face tremendous challenges. This line has not proved profitable and the vehicles for transporting waste they had bought early on are now non-functional; the debt due to the purchase of vehicles still weighs on them. This work is hazardous, and even though there was some early interest, urban bodies have neglected to provide them with safety equipment and appropriate clothing. The health of the workers has suffered badly too, from very hard labour. Since solid-waste management is vital for public health in general, the local government should evolve another model of self-help entrepreneurship especially for it. Workers should receive health insurance and free health-care in government hospitals; they must receive safety equipment and safe clothing at least once a year or at appropriate intervals. The vehicles to transport the waste must be bought by the local government and rented out to the workers to allow them to avoid the debt-trap. Older women workers in waste collection should not be discriminated against and should receive a small pension when they move out. Also, they solid-waste collectors should be allowed to use the facilities now available to city sanitation workers as a

matter of right. In general, a new model of self-help enterprise must be developed for areas like solid waste management which pose hazardous risks to health and may never be profitable: this should assign governments the duty to intervene effectively and provide vital infrastructure so that both health and economic risks are minimized for the poor who take them up.

- Trans women workers and jobseekers and senior women workers are particularly vulnerable to instability at work and livelihood crisis and hence deserve special attention from the local body. The responsibility to ensure them stable work and well-being at the workplace should be added to the official list of responsibilities of the Welfare Standing Committee. Also, the responsibility of finding affordable accommodation for trans women workers could also be added to this list.
- Taking into account the stigma and social isolation often suffered by domestic workers, the gender resource centre could offer them special consideration and attention.
- Many women workers in urban areas are still dependent on natural resources and spaces for their livelihoods. The local government should assume the responsibility of protecting these resources and ensuring their availability to these laboring women. Very often, these women support the poorest families, and their interests must be protected and their voices considered in all attempts towards development of urban space. The local self-government must become the focal point for their voices and it must mediate on behalf of them to secure their interests.
- The lack of mobility that society imposes on women is an important reason for the low participation of women in the workforce in Kerala. From the funds for cultural activities, a share should be set apart for organizing film festivals, plays, poster contests, discussions, and so on about women's right to full mobility. The contributions of women workers to world political history and Kerala's own history of political empowerment in the 20th century etc. could be topics around which discussions, exhibitions, and other cultural programmes could be organized.
- Travelling long distances for work often cuts heavily into the incomes of informal sector women workers. It may be important to help women workers, and more importantly, transwomen workers, to become more mobile through owning and driving two-wheelers, but it may be even more vital to take up measures to make public transport more women-friendly and accessible – and this is also crucial to improve women's and general safety in public places. So it may be useful to offer concessions to start special

bus services for women especially to urban areas where there is a concentration of women workers (for example, in urban areas with major textile shops) at convenient hours which could be run by local governments in partnership with employers.

- Projects that help senior women workers to move into less strenuous and dignified forms of work, such as running a petty shop or other such ventures need to be planned and implemented. This is necessary to help them continue a life of dignified labour in their late years. Support for this must be offered in such a way that does not lead them towards a debt trap.

Planning and Democratization

In general, it is clear that the suggestions above are not practically realizable unilaterally from above, or by isolated local bodies on their own. They call for the active involvement of not just the Kudumbashree network, but also of women workers' trade unions. It is a clear deviation from welfare-distribution that commences after a survey that is essentially a counting exercise. In this usual mode, the poor are passive and citizens are largely silent welfare-recipients. Here, the effort is to make audible the voices from below on proposals that originate above, to encourage them and lay stress on the critical issues they raise. Instead of carving out a new passive beneficiary group at the local level through a survey, the formation of a register of women who earn/seek/desire independent incomes through work serves to bring this question into public visibility and audibility again, and to actually produce precisely such a social group from within the community in general. It also allows us to imagine new connections between the Kudumbashree network and women workers in the informal sector.

These suggestions also reimagine the Women's Component Plan significantly. It suggests that we have no other way forward except through pluralizing the category of 'women' and recognizing transwomen, paying close attention to the hierarchies between different groups that inhabit it, and reorienting development in that light. There is no way ahead for democratic decentralization in Kerala, if it is indeed a legacy of Kerala's political democratization of the 20th century, except that of continuous democratization through the inclusion of more and more diverse voices.

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APPENDIX

Sl.No.	Activity to Achieve Objective	Responsibility/Govt. Dept./Agency
1	The problem of assessing the numbers of women workers in the informal sector is not easy to resolve. This makes it all the more important to locate efforts to prepare welfare proposals aiming at them at the local level. As a preliminary step, it is necessary to collect information about women workers at the ward-level through the Kudumbashree network under the supervision of the local Community Development Society (CDS)	Social Justice Department Kudumbashree Mission
2	Women in paid domestic work often suffer a great deal of stigma in society. Many of them hesitate to reveal their work status. They also sometimes remain reluctant to seek work openly and widely. Because of this they are often saddled with poor options – low wages and fewer opportunities. Local government level interventions are required here.	Social Justice Department Local Self Government Department
3	Transwomen workers and transwomen seeking work should be registered.	District Transgender Welfare Board
4	While deciding incentives for neighbourhood groups such as revolving funds, groups in which women workers form a certain share of the membership and all-women worker groups should be granted priority. This could be included in the criteria for allowing revolving funds.	Social Justice Department Kudumbashree Mission
5	Beyond granting women vendors the status of an oppressed sub-group in the Urban Wayside Vendor Document and in projects aimed at them, local bodies need to initiate a closer examination of the gender dimensions of wayside vending in their areas. The space for intervening effectively in issues raised by women and transwomen vendors must be cleared directly in these projects.	Local Self Government Department
6	The marriage-support grants common in our local bodies need to be limited. This does not mean that they should be ended fully. If necessary, they should be from general, and not women’s development funds.	Social Justice Department Local Self Government Department
7	Ensure full participation of women and transwomen workers in gramasabha deliberations. All women registered as engaged in, seeking/desiring work in the ward must be given direct notice of the ward and other sabhas and special effort must be made to ensure their participation. In the Village Sabhas, women who are in work and seek/desire work must be allowed to sit as a single group instead of remaining confined in their wards – and such practices as this must be institutionalized.	Local Self Government Department Local Governments

8	Under the aegis of the jagratha samithy and the gender resource centres, there should be a yearly awareness programme for women workers about their rights and legal entitlements and an assessment of the risks they face, and about sexual harassment at the workplace. Helping women workers facing such issues at the workplace to file complaints and take the process forward should be included among the official responsibilities of the jagratha samithy and the gender resource centre.	Social Justice Department Gender Resource Centres
9	Extend the present welfare benefits available to Kudumbashree members in particular panchayats to senior women workers and transwomen workers, for example, free medical supplies.	Social Justice Department
10	The returned migrant workers get welfare support only for ten years after they return. This condition should be waived for women returnees. A welfare fund should be instituted for the families of un organized sector women workers for special support in case of death of supporting women workers.	Social Justice Department Pravasi welfare Board
11	What is required is not support for individual homes for individual families through self-help, but housing complexes built by the local bodies closer to urban centres of work and allocated to women-worker-led families on low rents, on a long-term basis. The criteria for allocation should include not just women-led status but also those of caste, age, differently-abled, and gender minority status.	Social Justice Department Local Self Government Department
12	A larger share of women who work and seek work in the informal sector bear family responsibilities. Unless the burdens of caring for the aged and the young are reduced, the prospect of their entering the labour market remains decidedly dim. Therefore it may be important to explore if setting up and running complexes composed of crèches, day-homes for the elderly, and play spaces for teenagers can be included in Kudumbashree's livelihood promotion activities and the necessary training for it supported by the National Urban Livelihood Mission. Women workers and wayside vendors should be able to access these facilities at lower rates.	Social Justice Department Women's & Child Development Department

13	It may be beneficial to include the caring labour in the MNREGS. This is of particular significance in Kerala's context. The beneficiaries of MNREGS here are usually poor women. The necessary training for this could be provided through the skill-development programme. These trainings should be done formally in technical institutions to train women also for better care activities – physiotherapy, palliative care, equipped pre-school educators, youth educators, yoga teachers etc. to meet the needs of the ageing populations.	Social Justice Department
14	Projects to ensure the security of women workers' minor children may be launched. Very often, women seek paid labour when they face severe domestic violence and/or neglect in their families. There is a crying need for children in such circumstances, for short-stay homes, set up perhaps by Kudumbashree or the Kerala Mahila Samakhya – or under the supervision of women's trade unions.	Social Justice Department
15	Make available counseling services for families facing domestic crises over women's work, through gender resource centres. The gender resources centre could also be used to make available legal advice and help to women workers free of cost and conduct awareness programmes on labour laws and sexual harassment at workplace.	Gender Resource Centres
16	Care facilities must be necessarily made available in places close and accessible for women workers. If there is a concentration of women workers in any part of the city, and if a certain number of them demand a crèche-day-home-playspace complex, the city government must be bound to providing this within a reasonable distance of the workplace. Such needs should find a key place in the project-making processes of urban bodies.	Local Self Government Department Corporation/ Panchayats
17	As far as women workers in informal work are concerned, wages and dignified working conditions are the most important issues. Clean and free toilet facilities, a proper rest room for meals and breaks, and decent behavior from employers and supervisors – it is the absence of such basic conditions that often alienate women from the workplace. Much of this can be alleviated by local governments.	Labour Department Local Governments
18	Many shops especially textile shops, are notorious for making women workers stand for eight or more hours, and despite this being an issue widely debated in public through the efforts of women's trade unions, no respite seems to be near. The LSGs need to urgently intervene in this.	Labour Department Local Governments

19	At present, the work opportunities created in construction activities are mostly exploited by employment agencies which do not pay women workers a minimum wage and actually even extract a commission from them. The local body ought to secure these opportunities for local women who may be seeking work.	Local Governments
20	In many of the local bodies, Kudumbashree women perform a considerable amount of labour receiving nominal remuneration. Official or unofficial, this work remains poorly remunerated and often poorly recognized as well (projected as 'service'). Kudumbashree leaders are particularly the informal workers, partly at least, of the development sector today. The labour they perform for the government ought to be remunerated with minimum wages.	Labour Department Local Self Government Department
21	Transwomen workers and jobseekers and senior women workers are particularly vulnerable to instability of work and livelihood and hence deserve special attention from the local body. The responsibility to ensure them stable work and well-being at the workplace should be added to the official list of responsibilities of the Welfare Standing Committee.	Social Justice Department Local Self Government Department
22	Taking into account the stigma and social isolation often suffered by domestic workers, the gender resource centre could offer them special consideration and attention.	Local Self Government Department Pravasi welfare Board
23	The lack of mobility that society imposes on women is an important reason for the low participation of women in the workforce in Kerala. From the funds for cultural activities, a share should be set apart for organizing film festivals, plays, poster contests, discussions, and so on about women's right to full mobility.	Department of Culture
24	Travelling long distances for work often cuts heavily into the incomes of informal sector women workers. It may be important to help women workers, and more importantly, transwomen workers, to become more mobile through owning and driving two-wheelers, but it may be even more vital to take up measures to make public transport more women-friendly and accessible	Social Justice Department
25	Projects that help senior women workers to move into less strenuous and dignified forms of work, such as running a petty shop or other such ventures need to be planned and implemented.	Social Justice Department



Centre for Development Studies

(Under the aegis of Govt. of Kerala & Indian Council of Social Science Research)

Prasanth Nagar Road, Ulloor, Thiruvananthapuram - 695 011, Kerala, India

Tel : +91 - 471 - 2774200, 2448881, Fax : +91 - 471 - 2447137

Website : www.cds.edu