

COLLECTIVE EMPOWERMENT: THE ROLE OF AYALKOOTAM IN ADVANCING WOMEN FISH VENDORS IN KERALA'S BLUE ECONOMY

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Women play a pivotal role in the fisheries value chain, particularly in post-harvest and vending activities. However, their contributions remain largely unrecognized in the framework of the blue economy. This qualitative study explores how Ayalkootam (neighbourhood groups) under Kudumbashree empower women fish vendors in Kerala's coastal regions, focusing on their role in enhancing financial capital, social solidarity, and collective agency. The Ayalkootam model, embedded within the Kudumbashree Mission, has become a vital institution for strengthening financial capital among women fish vendors. Through structured savings, access to microcredit, and mutual support mechanisms, Ayalkootams provide a financial cushion that enables these women to invest in better equipment, transportation, and bulk procurement of fish. This has improved their income security and reduced dependence on predatory informal lenders. Furthermore, Ayalkootams have helped inculcate financial literacy and negotiation skills, empowering women to navigate market dynamics more confidently. Beyond financial gains, Ayalkootams function as socially cohesive support networks, fostering solidarity and shared identity among women in a highly competitive and gender-biased sector.

Field-based evidence from Trivandrum district reveals that Ayalkootams have contributed to improved access to credit, enhanced savings practices, and increased financial decision-making at the household level. Furthermore, the collective strength of Ayalkootams has helped women mitigate market disruptions such as growing online seafood platforms, increasing male competition in traditional markets, and declining fish catch due to environmental degradation.

By applying the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework, this paper shows that Ayalkootams help women rebuild lost capitals—particularly financial, social, and human capital—thereby acting as micro-nodes of resilience in Kerala's coastal economy. Women reported that Ayalkootam membership improved their financial discipline, access to emergency loans, and participation in microenterprise training, which were otherwise unavailable through formal institutions. The peer-based support also provided a sense of emotional security, logistical collaboration, and collective resistance against structural barriers in the fish vending ecosystem. By integrating women's voices and reproductive labour into the blue economy discourse, this study underscores the importance of recognizing and strengthening women-led collectives. The findings advocate for mainstreaming such decentralized, community-based models in fisheries planning, positioning them as transformative agents for inclusive development and gender-just blue economies.