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Women-led Farm Support: The Role of Kudumbashree and Farmer Producer Organizations in Supporting Smallholder Agriculture in Kerala

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Abstract:

Women-led institutions in Kerala—particularly Kudumbashree Joint Liability Groups (JLGs) and Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs)—have emerged as innovative platforms that support smallholder agriculture, enhance community resilience, and challenge entrenched gender hierarchies. This article investigates how these institutions function as alternative infrastructures of care and cooperation in the face of agrarian precarity and systemic exclusion. Drawing on qualitative fieldwork across five sites in Kerala during August–September 2024, including five focus group discussions and twenty semi-structured interviews, the research identifies four key thematic areas: social capital and survival, leadership and decision-making, market access and value, and empowerment and resilience. Each theme is further broken into sub-themes reflecting emotional solidarity, ritual practices, emergent voice, institutional power asymmetries, and shifting household dynamics. While Kudumbashree JLGs build deep-rooted emotional trust through relational governance, FPOs facilitate broader market linkages and institutional visibility. Together, they create a hybrid governance ecology—one that balances embedded care with external accountability. Yet these models are not without frictions: FPOs often replicate gendered hierarchies despite their cooperative mandate, while JLGs may lack access to formal policy benefits. This study contributes to the literature on feminist institutionalism, hybrid governance, and rural transformation by centring women's lived narratives and collective strategies. It calls for enabling policy frameworks that sustain diverse forms of cooperation, recognise local forms of knowledge, and institutionalise care as a development value. Kerala's experience holds broader relevance for inclusive agrarian reform in India and across the global South.

Keywords: Farm Support

1. Introduction

Agricultural development remains a pressing challenge in many parts of the world, particularly in contexts where smallholder farmers form the backbone of food production. In these systems, women often play a vital yet under-recognised role. Globally, they contribute significantly to planting, harvesting, food processing, and farm management, yet their visibility in policy and their access to land, finance, and institutional support remains structurally limited (FAO, 2011; Agarwal, 2010). Despite being central to agrarian economies, women are often treated as peripheral actors in both agricultural planning and cooperative governance.

This article argues that women-led institutions in Kerala—specifically Kudumbashree Joint Liability Groups (JLGs) and Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs)—offer alternative pathways to inclusive rural development, rooted in care, cooperation, and collective voice. These institutions not only support livelihoods but also serve as arenas for social transformation and political learning. Through them, women challenge the historical invisibility of their labour, re-negotiate intra-household power, and build solidarities that defy traditional market and policy boundaries.

The political and strategic significance of these models lies in their potential to reframe the narrative of development: from one driven by scale and output to one shaped by inclusion, recognition, and dignity. As countries across the Global South invest in farmer collectivisation schemes, Kerala's hybrid model of grassroots-led and state-supported institutions offers an important counter-narrative. It demonstrates that empowerment does not require abandoning emotional infrastructure for efficiency, and that formal markets and informal care can co-exist—sometimes uneasily, but often productively.

While rooted in the state of Kerala, this study speaks directly to broader global debates around inclusive development, feminist institutionalism, and grassroots governance. The themes identified—ranging from emotional solidarity to market navigation—resonate with the challenges and innovations found in women-led agricultural cooperatives across the Global South. As such, this research offers valuable insight for community development practitioners, scholars, and policy-makers seeking to create resilient, participatory support systems that move beyond technocratic delivery models toward care-anchored transformation.

This article explores three central questions:

1. How do Kudumbashree JLGs and FPOs support smallholder women farmers in Kerala?
2. What governance arrangements and support mechanisms shape their inclusiveness?
3. In what ways do these institutions enable—or limit—pathways to empowerment?

Through an in-depth qualitative inquiry conducted in five districts of Kerala, the paper reveals how women experience and reshape institutional life—crafting trust, exercising voice, resisting marginalisation, and reimagining what it means to farm together.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study draws upon three interlinked bodies of theory to understand how women-led institutions in Kerala function as spaces of support, transformation, and empowerment: feminist institutionalism, collective action theory, and hybrid governance. These frameworks help interpret not just what these institutions do, but how and why they matter—particularly for women whose economic agency is shaped by social norms, historical exclusions, and relational power.Feminist Institutionalism.

1. Feminist Institutionalism: Gender and the Rules of the Game Feminist institutionalism begins with a simple but powerful premise: institutions are not neutral (Rai and Waylen, 2014). Whether formal—like FPO boards—or informal—like group decision-making spaces—they are structured by gendered expectations about who speaks, who leads, and who is heard. As Mackay (2009) argues, inclusion is not the same as influence. Women may be physically present in institutional spaces yet symbolically or procedurally excluded.

This perspective helps unpack why women in FPOs often feel like "spectators," even when holding official roles, while in JLGs, leadership may flourish despite the absence of formal hierarchy.

2. Collective Action and Relational Capabilities: Traditional collective action theory (Ostrom, 2005) has long examined how people organise for shared benefit, manage commons, and reduce individual risk. Feminist scholars have extended this to include relational capabilities—the ability to act not only individually, but in concert with others, based on mutual trust, emotional support, and shared identity (Agarwal, 2010; Cornwall and Edwards, 2010).

   In women's agricultural groups across the Global South, cooperation is not only instrumental but affective. The act of joining a group may yield confidence, dignity, and social standing long before it produces economic returns. These dynamics are central to understanding the experience of Kudumbashree members.

3. Hybrid Governance and Moral Economies: Kerala offers a compelling example of hybrid governance—where public institutions, grassroots networks, and market-facing entities overlap and interact (Mosse, 2005). Kudumbashree JLGs are embedded in panchayat-level structures and animated by state missions, yet function with a high degree of community autonomy. FPOs, by contrast, are part of national efforts to formalise farmer aggregations under a corporate framework (Ministry of Agriculture, 2020), yet are often facilitated by local NGOs.

   This hybridity produces not only cooperation but also conflict. It requires navigating between different logics: one rooted in care and accountability to peers; the other in contracts, targets, and managerial performance. Tronto's (1993) ethic of care offers a useful lens here, urging us to see care not as a private emotion but a public value, integral to sustainable development.

2. Materials and Methods

This study employed a qualitative, multi-sited case study approach over a two-month period—August and September 2024—in the Indian state of Kerala. The research aimed to understand the institutional dynamics and lived experiences of women participating in two distinct farm-support models: Kudumbashree Joint Liability Groups (JLGs) and Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs). The sites were selected to reflect diversity in ecological zones, institutional maturity, and socio-economic contexts, spanning five districts: Alappuzha, Palakkad, Idukki, Ernakulam, and Kozhikode.

A total of five case studies were selected: three JLGs and two FPOs. Data collection tools included:

- Five Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) (one per case), involving 40 participants in total.
- Twenty in-depth semi-structured interviews with a subset of participants.
- Field observations during farming activities, group meetings, and procurement transactions.

Participants were selected purposively to ensure a mix in age, caste background, land ownership status, and years of group membership. Focus groups explored group formation, decision-making, emotional dynamics, and external interactions. Interviews allowed participants to reflect on their personal

trajectories, institutional roles, and aspirations. Observations added behavioural and spatial texture to the data.

All discussions were conducted in Malayalam, recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English. Data were thematically coded using an inductive approach, with coding categories emerging from repeated readings of transcripts and field notes. Each sub-theme in the findings reflects not only recurring narratives but also thick descriptions of group life, speech, and interactional behaviour.

Pseudonyms are used throughout this article to protect participant anonymity. The researcher maintained close field notes and reflexive memos throughout the study to track positionality and power dynamics during data collection. The research design aligns with feminist qualitative methods, privileging lived knowledge, contextual nuance, and voice-based interpretation (Narayanaswamy, 2013; Rao, 2016).

Table 1 – Participant Profile by Case Study

Participant Code	District	Age	Type of Group	Years in Group	Primary Role
P01	Alappuzha	54	JLG	6	Founding Member
P02	Palakkad	42	JLG	4	Treasurer
P03	Idukki	45	JLG	5	Rotating Coordinator
P04	Ernakulam	39	FPO	3	Marketing Support
P05	Kozhikode	41	FPO	2	Board Member
P06-P20	Various	28-60	JLG/FPO	2-10	Member/Committee Role

A table presenting the demographic and role details of semi-structured interview participants across five districts in Kerala. It includes participant codes, age range, group type (JLG or FPO), years of participation, and primary roles, such as founding member, treasurer, and board member.

Table 2 – Focus group discussions conducted

Focus Group Code	District	Type of Group	Number of Participants	Group Composition
FGD1	Alappuzha	JLG	8	Mostly widows and deserted women
FGD2	Palakkad	JLG	7	Mixed caste and age; semi-literate members
FGD3	Idukki	JLG	7	Highland farmers; tribal and Dalit representation
FGD4	Ernakulam	FPO	9	NGO-facilitated mid-career farmers
FGD5	Kozhikode	FPO	9	Newly formed; many first-time women board members

A table summarising the composition of five focus groups conducted across different districts. It provides the number of participants in each group, the type of collective (JLG or FPO), and a brief note on the social composition of the group, including widows, tribal women, and first-time board members.

3. Findings

The findings are organised into four major themes, each with 2–3 sub-themes. These themes emerged through repeated patterns in how women described their experiences in JLGs and FPOs. This section weaves direct quotes with field context and interpretive insights to surface the emotional, institutional, and economic dynamics of collective participation.

Theme 1: Social Capital and Survival

For many women, the primary value of Kudumbashree JLGs lies not in profit, but in emotional safety and communal care. This theme explores how solidarity, ritual, and informal reciprocity form a crucial support system—one that sustains women in the absence of formal welfare. The JLG becomes a site not just for farming, but for healing, anchoring memory, and surviving everyday trauma.

1.1: Emotional Solidarity as Infrastructure

During an early field visit to Alappuzha district, the first focus group (FGD1) included a group of older women who had been farming together for six years. Mariyamma, a 54-year-old widow and one of the founding members of the JLG, offered a deeply personal reflection while discussing why she initially joined the group:

"I lost my husband to drink. She lost hers to the Gulf. We found each other in the mud. Now we plant side by side like soil-sisters. We don't have to explain our pain—it's in the silence between us. The field hears it too."

This moment occurred after a long silence, during which the women had been talking about the absence of male support in their lives. The term "soil-sisters" resonated deeply across the group—many touched Mariyamma's hand or nodded, acknowledging a kinship not rooted in blood, but in shared hardship and land.

In Idukki's tribal highland settlement (FGD3), Rekha, a woman in her early forties whose family had lost their home to a landslide, added:

"We know each other's sorrows like our own skin. Even if the house collapses, the field remembers. What we bury in it—our tears, our hunger—it gives back to us in grain. It carries our stories when we can't."

Her voice was low, almost inaudible at first. She was speaking during a segment on why the group chose to cultivate certain crops after disaster relief. The metaphor of the field as a living memory underscored how the land itself bore witness to suffering and recovery.

This underscores that trust isn't merely a function of regular meetings—it is embedded in **memory, kinship, and co-suffering**. These informal emotional bonds provide the foundation for resilience and risk-sharing (Sanyal, 2014; Tronto, 1993).

1.2: Ritual Practices and Everyday Care

In the mountainous terrain of Idukki (K3), participant observation revealed that women often began their farming work by singing devotional songs. These were not rehearsed but instinctive—songs from temples, lullabies, and work chants. During a midday break, the group was asked about this practice. Shiji, 48, paused from eating her packed rice and explained:

"We sing not just for God but for each other. The song gives rhythm to our hands and silence to our suffering. Even when our bodies ache, the sound makes the work lighter. It reminds us we're not alone out here."

This response came after one of the researchers remarked how beautiful their voices sounded in the field. Reshma, a 32-year-old woman who had joined the group just a year earlier, chimed in while sorting seeds under a shade tree:

"The heat, the pain, the debt—when we sing, it doesn't disappear, but it becomes smaller. Our voices rise above the mud. We laugh, tease, and work as if we're dancing. That's how we stay alive in this."

Their statements were not poetic flourishes. They were practical strategies for coping with long, unpaid labour. Singing was less about devotion and more about continuity—it gave the day shape and meaning.

These observations reflect how **rituals generate emotional rhythm** in otherwise isolating tasks—what Cornwall and Edwards (2010) call the "micro-politics of endurance."

1.3: Informal Safety Nets

In Palakkad (FGD2), a discussion around health challenges brought forth stories of care that extended beyond farming duties. Anitha, aged 42, recounted:

"When I broke my arm, I thought I'd lose the season. I didn't even ask—they just came. Weeding, watering, bringing meals. It wasn't charity—it was instinct. They knew that if I fell behind, we all would."

She told this story with quiet pride. It had taken place the previous year, and she recalled lying at home feeling helpless until her fellow members simply arrived and took care of her fields.

Leela (FGD1, Alappuzha) shared a similar memory from the year floods submerged her small plot. She recounted the moment when she thought she would have to stop farming:

"My home and fields were under water. I had nothing left, not even dry rice. But they came anyway—brought me seeds, pots, and a hot flask of tea. I felt like I was worth saving. Not forgotten."

Her voice cracked slightly during this recollection. It wasn't the seeds that moved her, but the simple act of someone showing up with a hot drink and tools—offering dignity when she felt ashamed to ask for help.

Across all five sites, the most consistent and resonant finding was that solidarity was not a side benefit of the JLG—it was its foundation. These women had built their own systems of mutual support where

the state and family had often failed. Singing, remembering, arriving unasked—these were political acts of care. They reveal a collective ethic that binds women together, allowing them not only to farm but to carry each other through illness, abandonment, and ecological loss. Infrastructures of intimacy, not institutions of power, sustain survival in these contexts.

Theme 2: Leadership and Decision-Making

While women in Kudumbashree JLGs often grow into leadership roles through trust-based, informal interactions, their participation in FPOs is frequently shaped by procedural inclusion with limited influence. This theme captures the contrasts between emergent leadership cultivated through lived group dynamics and formal structures that often lack space for real voice or negotiation. It reveals how women find their voice gradually—and how that voice can be muted in institutional settings not designed for them.

2.1: Emergent Voice and Political Confidence

In Palakkad district (Interview with Devaki, K2), a 50-year-old JLG member reflected on her early reluctance to speak during group meetings. The interview was conducted in her modest home, surrounded by her grandchildren and fields in the distance. As she traced her journey over the past five years, she said:

"When I joined, I wouldn't even say my name in a group. I'd hide behind the others. Now I go to the Panchayat office, ask for updates, and argue about seed quality. Even my husband watches me like I've become someone new."

She laughed after saying this, surprised at herself. Her confidence had emerged not from a workshop or formal training, but from the safety and solidarity of repeated conversations with her peers. Her story underscores how political voice develops in spaces where risk is low, and recognition is high.

A similar sentiment was expressed during FGD2 when Anju, aged 38, recounted her early days in the group:

"In our meetings, we speak even when our voice shakes. At first it cracks, stammers, falls quiet—but each time we try, it shakes less. Eventually, the silence becomes speech. And people start to listen."

This was met with laughter and nods—every woman in the group related to that early trembling. It illustrated the emotional infrastructure of leadership: a space where mistakes are allowed and silence is not punished.

Here, **speech becomes political participation**—a performative assertion of presence, echoing Kabeer (1999) and Rai & Waylen (2014).

2.2: Informal and Rotational Authority

In Idukki's highland JLG (K3), no one held a formal leadership title. Yet during the weekly meeting observed by the researcher, it was clear that Manjula, a 45-year-old woman, organically directed the conversation. She summarised past actions, suggested the planting calendar, and kept time. When this was pointed out later during a tea break, Manjula shrugged and said:

"We don't vote or appoint leaders. We talk until someone listens. Sometimes we fight, then we laugh, then we agree. Today it's me. Tomorrow it's someone else. That's how it should be."

The statement wasn't evasive—it captured the essence of rotational leadership. Everyone in the group had led at some point; leadership was distributed through memory, shared labour, and relational trust. Unlike hierarchical models, this form of decision-making was fluid and emotionally intelligent.

This informal consensus mechanism builds **collective legitimacy rather than positional power**. In contrast to rule-bound elections, this process reflects feminist approaches to distributed leadership (Mackay, 2009).

2.3: Gendered Exclusion in Formal Spaces

In Kozhikode (FGD5), Shahana, a 41-year-old FPO board member, spoke about her experience of attending board meetings. She had been nominated to the board by a local NGO but was rarely consulted on critical matters. When asked how she felt in these spaces, she replied:

"I sit in the board meeting like a schoolgirl. I don't know the words they use—procurement, credit flow, MOU. So I stay quiet and try to understand. They nod at me but never ask for my thoughts."

Her statement wasn't bitter—it was honest. She recognised her lack of familiarity with the language of procurement and budgeting but expressed a desire to learn.

Najeeba, another FPO member present in the same group, added:

"The men decide what we grow. They fix the price, make the deals. We just hear the final plan. But we are the ones in the sun with the soil under our nails."

Her tone was sharper. She described a recent contract negotiation where she was listed as the "farmer leader" on paper but was not included in any planning meetings. Both quotes highlight how women can be visible but voiceless—included for optics, excluded from strategy.

This reflects **symbolic inclusion without structural change**, confirming critiques of tokenistic participation (Cornwall & Brock, 2005; Ferguson, 2015).

This theme reveals a layered understanding of leadership: one that cannot be captured by titles or institutional design alone. In JLGs, leadership emerges through repetition, relationships, and recovery from silence. In FPOs, even when women are positioned as formal leaders, the culture often lacks mechanisms for real participation. Feminist institutional theory reminds us that representation without redesign risks reinforcing exclusion. These women are not waiting to be empowered—they are already practising leadership, just not always in spaces that recognise it.

Theme 3: Market Access and Value

This theme explores how women engage with markets through two distinct institutional pathways: through trust-based local networks in JLGs, and through formalised buyer linkages in FPOs. While JLGs prioritise relationships and embedded trade, FPOs offer the promise of scale, branding, and institutional access. Yet for many women, access to markets does not automatically translate into

power within them. This theme investigates the **tensions between visibility and control**, and how women navigate contracts, pricing, and value beyond monetary terms.

3.1: Relationship-Based Local Trade

In Idukki (FGD3), a highland region with strong ties between community members, Mini, a 45-year-old smallholder, described how their JLG regularly supplied vegetables to a local Anganwadi (childcare centre). She had been part of the group for five years, and the discussion took place during a focus group where participants were reflecting on where they preferred to sell their produce. With a wry smile, Mini said:

"Our tomatoes go to the Anganwadi. They don't pay much. But they smile, they know our names. We feed their children, they feed our dignity. We don't farm for profit alone—we farm to feel needed."

The women chuckled. The researcher followed up, asking why they didn't explore bigger markets or more lucrative buyers. One of Mini's peers answered:

"When the school cooks see us coming, they wave. It's not just vegetables—they see us as mothers, not vendors. That respect matters more than one extra rupee per kilo."

This quote came not from a place of resignation, but of pride. For these women, markets were not just economic spaces—they were moral spaces. Selling locally, even at a lower price, offered dignity, recognition, and social bonding. These forms of embedded exchange reflect what Scott (1976) calls a moral economy—where relationships matter more than returns.

3.2: Contract Farming and External Linkages

In Ernakulam (FGD4), a more urbanised district, the FPO had recently secured a contract to supply pesticide-free vegetables to a hospital chain. The group described this with a sense of nervous pride. Salma, a 37-year-old woman who had joined the FPO only two years earlier, recounted:

"They asked for organic, and we said yes—even though we didn't fully understand. We learned together—how to sort, how to pack, how to speak to buyers. We weren't just workers. We became professionals with names and phone numbers."

Her quote came in response to a question about whether they felt confident handling institutional buyers. The process had involved quick training, new inputs, and changes in packaging. One member showed off the new branded sacks they now used and added:

"We bought scales, printed labels, learned to weigh properly. When we saw our own group's name on the bag, it felt like we had arrived—like we weren't invisible anymore."

This illustrates **experimental learning,** how formal markets can be tools for learning and pride, even when they introduce stress **within formal systems** (Ostrom, 2005; Sanyal, 2014). The shift from unlabelled sacks to printed bags signalled more than a cosmetic upgrade—it represented a sense of legitimacy and identity.

Still, several women admitted they struggled to maintain consistent supply, and feared losing contracts due to weather or illness. The contract, while empowering in some ways, also increased emotional and logistical pressure.

3.3: Knowledge Asymmetry and Power

In Kozhikode (FGD5), a newer FPO formed with the help of an NGO, members raised concerns about how little they understood of the FPO's pricing and planning. Pushpa, a 43-year-old member who was often tasked with physical labour but never attended board meetings, stated:

"The men fix the rates, deal with the accounts. We're told what to grow and when. We find out the selling price only after the harvest is gone. It feels like we're farming blind."

This quote emerged during a heated discussion about a recent sale of ginger to an external trader. None of the women present knew how the price was fixed. Despite being producers, women lacked **access to strategic knowledge**, reinforcing old power structures (Agarwal, 2014). Nisha, a 36-year-old member who joined from another district, added:

"We work in the sun, carry the sacks, and pack them ourselves. But when the buyer calls, they speak only to the men. It's like we grow the crops—but our voice is left behind."

She laughed bitterly when asked if she had ever participated in a negotiation. The quotes point to a clear knowledge asymmetry—a division not of labour, but of information and agency. Women were producing, transporting, and packing—but not setting prices or strategy. Their access to markets was functional, but not empowered.

This theme highlights a critical disjuncture in institutional inclusion: access without autonomy. While JLGs privilege embedded, localised trade with affective returns, FPOs offer scale but often reproduce gendered divisions of power. For markets to be empowering, participation must include pricing knowledge, planning input, and interpretive control—not just delivery and branding. These women are not seeking escape from the market—they are demanding a fairer, more participatory version of it.

Theme 4: Empowerment and Resilience

Empowerment in the context of this study is not an abstract, quantifiable output—it is a lived process. It unfolds slowly, through everyday moments: in kitchens, community meetings, and quiet self-reflection. This theme captures how women reframe their roles within the household, gain recognition from their families, and begin to see themselves as contributors rather than dependents. Empowerment here is expressed not through grand gestures, but through dignity, self-recognition, and a transformed sense of possibility.

4.1: Intra-household Negotiation

In Palakkad (FGD2), during a dialogue about how income from collective farming is used at home, Gomathi, a 46-year-old member with two school-aged children, recounted a shift in how money circulates in her household. The group was seated in a shaded area near a field, reviewing ledgers and records. She shared, with a mix of humour and pride:

"I used to ask my husband for ten rupees to buy turmeric. Now he asks me how much we earned this week. Before, he saw me as someone who waits. Now he sees me as someone who decides."

The other women laughed knowingly. The quote reveals more than a change in cash flow—it reflects a reversal in household authority and recognition. Her economic contribution, however modest, altered her position from a dependent to a consulted partner in family decisions. This shift was echoed across sites, especially among long-term members. It reflects **relational empowerment**, grounded in financial agency and respect (Rao, 2016).

4.2: Intergenerational Dignity

In Alappuzha (Interview, K1), Sreekala, a 50-year-old JLG member who had joined after being widowed, shared how her participation in farming shifted how her children viewed her. She reflected on a time when her teenage daughter hesitated to mention her mother's farming to schoolmates. With quiet emotion, she said:

"At first, my daughter was ashamed I was farming—mud on my feet, sun on my back. But last month, she told her classmates: 'My mother grows rice that feeds the whole village.' That day, I felt like a queen."

This transformation was not simply about the food grown—it was about social status. What was once a symbol of poverty became a source of pride. This intergenerational pride marked a **cultural revaluation of labour** (Narayanaswamy, 2013).

The same sentiment surfaced in Idukki (FGD3) where another woman added:

"He would say, 'Amma only does women's work.' But now he brags that I'm a group leader. He sees the world differently because he sees me differently. That's what has changed most."

These quotes suggest that empowerment ripples beyond the women themselves. It transforms how future generations understand gender, labour, and contribution.

4.3: Collective Identity as Capital

In Idukki, after a long day of fieldwork and meetings (FGD3), the group sat in a circle near a community shed, reflecting on whether they saw themselves as entrepreneurs. Most of them hesitated. Unnima, a 48-year-old who had dropped out of school at age 12, spoke slowly and powerfully:

"We have no land, no degrees, no English. But we have our hands, our voices, and our groups. That's our capital. When we walk into a market together, even the shopkeeper speaks politely. They see us now."

Her metaphor stunned the circle into silence. She had captured the essence of what the group had built. While development discourse may focus on inputs and outputs, these women saw collective identity as their most enduring asset. Others chimed in, describing their groups as "our shield" and "our pride."

Empowerment, in this context, is a social process of becoming visible—to oneself, to one's children, to one's community. It is not achieved through one-time interventions but through daily negotiations, shared labour, and symbolic recognition. The women in this study were not merely earning money—they were redefining who they were and how they were valued. Their strength lay not in individual transformation, but in collective redefinition. Resilience was not innate—it was made, maintained, and multiplied through the group.

Table 3 Themes and Sub-themes emerging from the fieldwork

Theme	Sub-Themes
Social Capital & Survival	Emotional solidarity as infrastructure, Ritual practices and everyday care, Informal safety nets
Leadership & Decision-Making	Emergent voice and political confidence, Relational and rotational leadership, Symbolic inclusion in FPOs
Market Access & Value	Embedded local trade and moral markets, Contract farming and capacity-building, Knowledge asymmetry and exclusion
Empowerment & Resilience	Intra-household negotiation and status shift, Intergenerational dignity and recognition, Collective identity as social capital

A table outlining the four major themes derived from fieldwork and their corresponding sub-themes. Themes include social capital, leadership, market access, and empowerment, with sub-themes highlighting emotional solidarity, voice development, knowledge asymmetry, and collective identity.

4. Discussion

This study set out to explore how women-led institutions in Kerala—specifically Kudumbashree Joint Liability Groups (JLGs) and Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs)—support smallholder agriculture and foster empowerment. The findings suggest that these institutions function not merely as delivery mechanisms for farm inputs or market access, but as lived spaces of negotiation, emotion, and identity. Together, JLGs and FPOs form a hybrid ecosystem that sustains survival, shapes leadership, mediates market engagement, and redefines empowerment through collectivity.

1. Care as Infrastructure, Not Add-on

The theme of *Social Capital and Survival* challenges mainstream development models that treat care and emotional labour as peripheral to economic growth. For the women in this study, solidarity is infrastructure. Singing in the fields, remembering one another's losses, showing up unasked after a flood—these are not sentimental acts. They are strategic practices of mutual survival, shaped by gendered exclusion from formal support systems.

This echoes Tronto's (1993) argument that care is not just a private virtue but a public necessity, foundational to any just system. In the absence of adequate state provisioning, Kudumbashree JLGs create informal but robust care architectures—ones that persist because they are rooted in memory, rhythm, and shared time.

2. Voice as Process, Not Position

Findings under *Leadership and Decision-Making* show that JLGs nurture voice through iterative, relational participation. Women begin by trembling, but gradually speak with conviction. This aligns with Kabeer's (1999) framing of empowerment as the ability to make strategic life choices in contexts where this ability was previously denied.

Feminist institutionalism reminds us that presence is not the same as power (Mackay, 2009; Cornwall and Edwards, 2010). In FPOs, women are often formally included—on paper and in meetings—but their capacity to influence strategy is minimal. This results in symbolic inclusion without structural redesign, a phenomenon observed in many "gender mainstreamed" development spaces (Rai and Waylen, 2014).

3. Moral Economies vs. Market Logics

The theme of *Market Access and Value* reveals contrasting logics of trade. In JLGs, women sell to local institutions not for profit, but for dignity. In FPOs, contracts offer new visibility but also reproduce exclusions—through knowledge asymmetries, pricing opacity, and decision-making hierarchies.

This reflects Agarwal's (2014) concern about "participatory exclusion"—where women are nominally included but lack interpretive or strategic control. The market, in this context, becomes a space of partial access. Women deliver produce, but do not set prices. They attend meetings, but do not shape agendas. True economic inclusion requires not just entry, but epistemic authority—the ability to know, evaluate, and decide.

4. Empowerment as Collective Becoming

The final theme, *Empowerment and Resilience*, repositions empowerment from an individual asset to a relational and symbolic practice. It manifests in how husbands consult wives, how daughters feel pride, and how women reimagine themselves as contributors. This echoes Rao (2016), who argues that empowerment unfolds through collective identity, not just personal income or voice.

The quote—"We have no land, no power, no English, but we have our hands, our voices, and our groups"—summarises the ethic of relational agency. Here, identity itself becomes capital. This is not the empowerment of isolated entrepreneurs, but of connected actors building meaning through each other.

5. Strategic and Global Relevance

Kerala's women-led farm support system is not just a local innovation. It presents a counter-narrative to technocratic development across the Global South. In countries from Bangladesh to Brazil, women's cooperatives and grassroots networks are being mobilised as delivery platforms. Yet too often, their transformative potential is undercut by a failure to invest in relational, iterative, and locally grounded institutions.

This research speaks to international debates about the role of care, voice, and recognition in building sustainable and inclusive systems. It invites practitioners and scholars to look beyond output-based metrics and ask deeper questions: Who decides? Who is recognised? Whose knowledge counts?

5. Conclusion

This article has explored how women-led institutions in Kerala—Kudumbashree JLGs and FPOs—operate as transformative spaces of care, cooperation, and collective agency. Through field-based evidence from five districts, it demonstrates that these organisations do more than support farming—they reconfigure the **moral, emotional, and political landscapes** of rural development.

JLGs offer an infrastructure of solidarity, rooted in ritual, emotional reciprocity, and mutual obligation. FPOs extend market access and visibility, but often replicate exclusions unless intentionally restructured. Together, they illustrate the need for **hybrid governance** that balances institutional formality with local emotional intelligibility.

Rather than measure empowerment in outputs, this study has shown it to be a **social and symbolic process**—expressed in voice, recognition, negotiation, and shared dignity. These are not auxiliary outcomes; they are core to any genuine project of inclusion.

The Kerala experience, while contextually specific, holds wider significance. It reminds us that community development cannot succeed without **deep listening, institutional humility, and a politics of care**. As global systems of production and welfare continue to fragment, the grounded, collective models emerging from these women's hands and voices offer urgent lessons—for Kerala, for India, and for the world.

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