



## Women’s Economic Empowerment and Intimate Partner Violence in Kerala: A Mixed-Methods Study

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### Abstract

Kerala occupies an ambiguous position in feminist scholarship on South Asia. Long celebrated for its high female literacy, low fertility, and favourable sex ratio the so-called “Kerala model” of human development the state nevertheless exhibits persistent gender inequalities in labour force participation, property ownership, decision-making power, and exposure to intimate partner violence (IPV). This study examines the gap between formal indicators of gender equality and women’s lived experiences of patriarchal authority by analysing how economic empowerment is negotiated within households and how such negotiations shape vulnerability to IPV. The analysis draws on Kandiyoti’s concept of the “patriarchal bargain,” Sen’s framework of cooperative conflicts, Kabeer’s resources–agency–achievements model, and Crenshaw’s intersectional approach. A mixed-methods convergent design integrates a survey of 412 ever-married women across four districts of Kerala with thirty in-depth interviews and four focus group discussions conducted between January and August 2024. Quantitative findings show that women with independent income are 1.42 times more likely to participate in major household decisions, yet display a non-linear relationship with IPV exposure, supporting the “backlash hypothesis.” Qualitative findings reveal that women negotiate patriarchal bargains by exchanging visible deference for substantive autonomy in culturally feminised domains. Caste and class significantly shape these negotiations. The study argues that economic empowerment, while necessary, is insufficient for emancipation. Effective policy must address the broader discursive and institutional contexts within which women’s agency is exercised.

**Keywords:**- Gender; Patriarchy; Economic Empowerment; Intimate Partner Violence; Intersectionality; Kerala; Mixed Methods; Feminist Methodology.

### Introduction

The State of Kerala has long occupied a paradoxical place in international scholarship on gender and development. Amartya Sen’s well-known intervention on “missing women” identified Kerala as one of the few South Asian regions with a female-favourable sex ratio, attributable in his account to relatively favourable kinship structures, matrilineal inheritance traditions in some communities, and high female literacy (Sen 1992). The Kerala Human Development Reports, the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), and a substantial body of comparative work continue to identify Kerala as an outlier within India on a range of headline gender indicators (Government of Kerala 2021). Yet a second, critical strand of feminist scholarship has insisted that this celebratory account misrepresents the texture of women’s everyday lives. Drawing on ethnographic and historical analysis, scholars such as J. Devika (2007), Praveena Kodoth and Mridul Eapen (2005), and Ritty Lukose (2009) have argued that the indicators around which the Kerala model is constructed do not, by themselves, capture the patriarchal authority that continues to organise households, labour markets, and public spaces in the state.

Three empirical realities anchor this critique. First, female labour force participation in Kerala remains lower than in many less-feted Indian states and has fallen further over the past decade (Hirway 2012; Mehrotra et al. 2014). Second, women's ownership of agricultural and residential property is heavily skewed: only a small fraction of land in Kerala is registered in women's names, despite recent legal reforms (Agarwal 1994; Kodoth and Eapen 2005). Third, NFHS-5 data on intimate partner violence indicate that approximately one in five ever-married women in Kerala report experiencing physical or sexual violence by their current husband, a rate that is lower than the national average but is sharply discordant with the state's reputation for gender progressivism (International Institute for Population Sciences 2021).

The puzzle at the centre of this study is therefore not whether Kerala's women are or are not "empowered," but how the relationship between economic empowerment, household bargaining power, and exposure to intimate partner violence is structured in a context where formal indicators and lived experience pull in different directions. Following Naila Kabeer (1999, 437), who insists that empowerment is meaningfully measured only through "the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such ability," the study asks how women in Kerala negotiate patriarchal authority and what role economic resources play in that negotiation.

## Research Problem

Three considerations frame the research problem. First, despite an extensive feminist economics literature on women's empowerment and intimate partner violence (Vyas and Watts 2009; Bhattacharyya, Bedi, and Chhachhi 2011), few mixed-methods studies have integrated econometric estimation with the kind of ethnographic depth that scholars such as Bina Agarwal (1997) and Patricia Jeffery, Roger Jeffery, and Andrew Lyon (1989) have argued is essential for understanding the negotiation of patriarchal power. Second, the Kerala-specific literature has tended to focus either on macro-indicators (Government of Kerala 2021) or on particular institutional sites such as Kudumbashree neighbourhood groups (Devika and Thampi 2007), leaving the everyday household-level negotiation of empowerment relatively under-examined. Third, intersectional analyses that take seriously the joint operation of caste, class, religion, and gender in shaping women's experiences in Kerala remain comparatively rare in the empirical literature (Rege 1998; Kodoth and Eapen 2005).

## Research Objectives

This study pursues four objectives:

- To examine the association between women's economic resources independent income, asset ownership, and access to financial services and their participation in household decision-making.
- To investigate the relationship between women's economic empowerment and exposure to intimate partner violence, with attention to non-linear and backlash dynamics.
- To document, through qualitative inquiry, the discursive strategies by which women in Kerala negotiate patriarchal authority within and beyond the household.
- To analyse, through an intersectional lens, how caste, class, and religion structure the experience of empowerment and the negotiation of patriarchy in contemporary Kerala.

## Research Questions

Consistent with the mixed-methods design adopted here, the study is organised around four interrelated research questions rather than a set of formal hypotheses. RQ1: How are women's economic resources associated with their participation in major household decisions? RQ2: How does economic empowerment correlate with women's exposure to intimate partner violence in Kerala? RQ3: What discursive strategies do women employ to negotiate patriarchal authority within the household? RQ4: How do caste, class, and religion shape the experience of empowerment in Kerala?

## Significance and Organisation

The study contributes to feminist scholarship on South Asia in three respects. First, it deploys a mixed-methods convergent design (Creswell and Plano Clark 2017) that joins econometric estimation with thematic qualitative analysis, addressing the methodological fragmentation that has long divided feminist economics from feminist sociology and anthropology (Hesse-Biber 2010). Second, it foregrounds the question of how Kerala's women navigate the gap between formal indicators of gender equality and persistent patriarchal authority a question that is empirically central but has rarely been examined in a single integrated study. Third, the explicit intersectional framing addresses a long-standing critique of South Asian gender scholarship (Mohanty 1988; Rege 1998; John 2014). The remainder of the article is organised as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature.

Section 3 develops the theoretical framework. Section 4 sets out the mixed-methods design, including a discussion of feminist methodology and researcher positionality. Section 5 presents the quantitative and qualitative findings. Section 6 discusses the findings in light of the theoretical framework. Section 7 concludes with policy implications and directions for further work.

## Literature Review

### Theorising Patriarchy and the Patriarchal Bargain

The conceptual vocabulary used in this study draws on a now-classical tradition of feminist theorisation of patriarchy. R. W. Connell (1987) advanced the influential argument that gender relations are organised through interlocking structures of labour, power, and cathexis, producing what she termed the gender order. Judith Butler (1990) further denaturalised gender by recasting it as a performative effect rather than a stable identity. Within this broad theoretical field, Deniz Kandiyoti's (1988) intervention on the "patriarchal bargain" has been particularly influential for the study of South Asian gender relations. Kandiyoti (1988, 275) argued that women routinely make "bargains" with patriarchal systems accommodations and strategies that maximise security and life chances within constraints they did not choose. The patriarchal bargain is not a moment of false consciousness but a "concrete set of constraints" that women actively negotiate, often in ways that reproduce the system even as they extract concessions from it.

### Empowerment, Agency, and the Household

The concept of women's empowerment was elaborated most influentially by Naila Kabeer (1999), who proposed a three-part conceptualisation comprising resources (material, human, and social pre-conditions), agency (the ability to define one's goals and act on them), and achievements (well-being outcomes). Kabeer (1999, 438) insisted that empowerment is meaningful only when it involves "strategic life choices," and warned against treating measurable outcomes as substitutes for the underlying capacity. Amartya Sen's (1990) formulation of cooperative conflicts households as sites of both shared interests and divergent claims, in which bargaining outcomes depend on perceived contributions, fallback positions, and social legitimacy provides a complementary analytical vocabulary. Bina Agarwal (1997) extended Sen's framework by emphasising the importance of property rights and the "bargaining environment" outside the household, including social norms, kinship structures, and the state.

### Intersectionality and the Critique of Universal Categories

A third theoretical strand is the intersectional tradition initiated by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991) and bell hooks (1984), and extended to the Indian context by Sharmila Rege (1998), Mary E. John (2014), and Uma Chakravarti (1993). Crenshaw (1991, 1244) argued that single-axis analyses of either race or gender systematically obscure the experiences of women located at their intersection. Rege (1998) provided a powerful Indian formulation through her articulation of the Dalit feminist standpoint, which critiques both Brahminical feminism for its inattention to caste and Dalit politics for its inattention to gender. The intersectional turn implies that any account of women's empowerment in India must engage with the ways in which caste, class, religion, and gender are co-constituted rather than additively layered.

### Economic Empowerment and Intimate Partner Violence

The relationship between women's economic empowerment and intimate partner violence is theoretically and empirically contested. The household bargaining model predicts that an increase in women's economic resources, by improving their fallback position, should reduce their exposure to violence (Aizer 2010). However, an alternative "male backlash" account, drawing on the work of Lori Heise (1998) and elaborated in the South Asian context by Pradeep Panda and Bina Agarwal (2005), holds that increases in women's income may threaten established gender hierarchies and provoke violence as a means of reasserting masculine authority. Seema Vyas and Charlotte Watts (2009), in a comprehensive review of evidence from low- and middle-income countries, found that the empirical relationship is heterogeneous and depends on contextual factors including the strength of patriarchal norms, the social legitimacy of women's earning, and the specific form of empowerment under consideration. For India, the work of Rohini Pande and colleagues has documented that microfinance-induced empowerment can both reduce and exacerbate IPV depending on programme design and local context (Pande et al. 2017).

### Gender Studies on Kerala

The Kerala-specific feminist literature is rich but methodologically fragmented. J. Devika's (2007) historical analysis traced the discursive production of the modern Malayali woman through twentieth-century reform movements, demonstrating that contemporary indicators of gender equality cannot be read as

straightforward markers of emancipation. Praveena Kodoth and Mridul Eapen (2005) provided a critical statistical analysis of well-being indicators that look beyond gender parity to document persistent inequalities in property, work, and decision-making. Ritty Lukose (2009) examined the gendered cultural politics of liberalisation through ethnographic study of college students. The Kudumbashree programme a state-supported community-based women's neighbourhood group network has been the focus of substantial work, with Devika and Thampi (2007) offering an early critical assessment that distinguished between empowerment as managed inclusion and liberation as transformative politics.

## Research Gap

Three gaps motivate the present study. First, while feminist economics has produced rigorous quantitative analyses of empowerment-IPV linkages, and feminist anthropology and history have produced rich qualitative accounts of women's lives in Kerala, integrated mixed-methods studies remain comparatively rare. Second, the conceptual apparatus of the patriarchal bargain has been less systematically deployed in Kerala-specific empirical work than its theoretical importance would warrant. Third, intersectional analyses that take seriously the joint operation of caste, class, and religion in Kerala remain underdeveloped, despite the foundational interventions of Rege (1998) and others. This study addresses these gaps through a convergent mixed-methods design integrating econometric estimation with thematic qualitative analysis.

## Theoretical Framework

### The Patriarchal Bargain as Analytical Lens

The study's primary analytical lens is Kandiyoti's (1988) concept of the patriarchal bargain. Kandiyoti (1988, 274) used the term to describe the strategic accommodations that women make with the gender order they inhabit. These bargains take historically and culturally specific forms; in what Kandiyoti termed "classic patriarchy," the bargain centres on a woman's investment in male-headed kinship arrangements that promise security in old age in exchange for compliance in youth. The classical formulation has been extended and critiqued (Kabeer 1999; Agarwal 1997), and recent scholarship has emphasised that patriarchal bargains are not static but renegotiated under conditions of economic change, demographic transition, and ideological transformation.

### Empowerment as Process: Kabeer's Framework

To operationalise empowerment, the study draws on Kabeer's (1999) resources agency achievements model. Resources include material assets (income, property), human capital (education, health), and social capital (kinship and community networks). Agency is the capacity to define and pursue goals, and includes both decision-making and the more diffuse capacity to challenge or resist. Achievements are the well-being outcomes that result from the exercise of agency under given resource constraints. The model is non-recursive: achievements feed back into resources, and resources without agency may not generate achievements. The framework is particularly suited to the present study because it disaggregates empowerment into distinct dimensions that can be measured both quantitatively (the resources and achievements dimensions) and qualitatively (agency, particularly in its discursive and strategic forms).

### Intersectionality as Methodological Imperative

Crenshaw's (1991) intersectional framework enters the analysis as a methodological imperative rather than merely a substantive variable. To take intersectionality seriously is to refuse the analytical separation of caste, class, religion, and gender, and to attend instead to the joint social locations they produce (Rege 1998; Chakravarti 1993). In practical terms, the framework requires both the disaggregation of quantitative findings by caste and religious community, and the explicit thematic attention in the qualitative analysis to how multiple axes of difference shape women's experiences and strategies. The framework also has consequences for the interpretation of findings: an outcome that is true on average across the sample may operate differently within particular intersectional locations, and an average effect can mask divergent or even contradictory dynamics.

### Conceptual Model

Integrating the three theoretical strands, the conceptual model posits that women's resources (RES) condition the agency (AG) they can exercise, with the resources-agency link mediated by patriarchal norms (PAT) and shaped by intersectional location (INT). Agency in turn produces achievements (ACH) along multiple dimensions, of which exposure to intimate partner violence is a particularly important well-being marker. The patriarchal bargain operates as the discursive and institutional context within which resources are converted into agency: where bargains are tightly drawn, equivalent resources will produce less agency than in contexts where bargains are loosely held or actively contested.

## Research Methodology

### Mixed-Methods Convergent Design

The study employs a mixed-methods convergent parallel design as articulated by John Creswell and Vicki Plano Clark (2017). In this design, quantitative and qualitative components are conducted concurrently, with priority assigned approximately equally to both strands, and the findings integrated through joint display and narrative interpretation at the analysis stage. The choice of design is theoretically motivated: feminist methodology has long argued that quantitative and qualitative approaches address complementary aspects of the social world (Hesse-Biber 2010; Tashakkori and Teddlie 2010), and that the integration of the two produces a fuller account than either alone.

### Quantitative Component

The quantitative component is based on an original survey of 412 ever-married women conducted between January and May 2024 in four districts of Kerala chosen to capture regional and cultural variation: Thiruvananthapuram in the south, Ernakulam in the central region, Thrissur in the central-north, and Malappuram in the north. The sampling strategy was multi-stage. Within each district, two panchayats were selected purposively to represent rural, semi-urban, and peri-urban locations. Within each panchayat, households were selected using a systematic random procedure, and within each household a single ever-married woman aged 18–60 was interviewed using a structured questionnaire administered in Malayalam. The achieved sample of 412 represents a response rate of 86 per cent.

**Table 1.** Key Variables in the Quantitative Survey

Variable	Definition / Measurement	Theoretical Anchor
Decision-making index	Composite score (0–10) of participation in major household decisions: healthcare, large purchases, children’s schooling, family visits, contraceptive use	Kabeer (1999) — agency
Independent income	Binary: =1 if respondent earned independent income in past 12 months	Kabeer (1999) — resources
Asset ownership	Number of major assets owned solely or jointly: land, house, savings account, jewellery, livestock	Agarwal (1994)
IPV exposure	Binary: =1 if respondent reported physical, sexual, or emotional violence by current spouse in past 12 months (adapted CTS scale)	Heise (1998)
Caste	Self-reported social group: SC/ST, OBC, General; religion noted separately	Crenshaw (1991); Rege (1998)
Controls	Age, education, husband’s education, household consumption, district, rural/urban	—

Note. CTS = Conflict Tactics Scale, adapted following Heise (1998) and the NFHS Domestic Violence Module. Author’s compilation.

The quantitative analysis comprises descriptive tabulations of empowerment and IPV indicators, a multivariate OLS estimation of decision-making participation as a function of economic resources and controls, and a logistic regression of IPV exposure on economic resources and controls with quadratic terms in income to test for non-linearities (the backlash hypothesis). All multivariate specifications include district fixed effects and cluster-robust standard errors at the panchayat level.

### Qualitative Component

The qualitative component comprises thirty in-depth semi-structured interviews and four focus group discussions conducted with women drawn from the survey sample, selected through maximum-variation purposive sampling to capture diversity along caste (SC, OBC, General; Hindu, Muslim, Christian), age (younger married women aged 25–35; older women aged 45–55), and location (rural, semi-urban). Interviews lasted between 60 and 120 minutes, were conducted in Malayalam by the author and a research associate trained in feminist methodology, and were audio-recorded with written informed consent. Focus group discussions, each comprising six to eight participants of broadly similar caste and life-stage, focused on collective negotiation of patriarchal authority and were facilitated using a semi-structured guide developed iteratively in dialogue with field notes from the in-depth interviews.

Analysis followed the reflexive thematic analysis framework of Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2019), with six iterative phases: familiarisation, initial coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition, and writing. Coding was conducted independently by two researchers and reconciled through dialogue, with theoretical sampling continued until thematic saturation was reached. All data were managed using NVivo 14. Selected quotations are presented in translation, with the original Malayalam available from the author on request.

## Integration

Quantitative and qualitative findings are integrated at two stages. First, during analysis, a joint display matrix maps quantitative associations against qualitative themes to identify convergences, complementarities, and divergences (Creswell and Plano Clark 2017, 222). Second, in the interpretation, the discussion section explicitly draws on both strands of evidence in addressing each research question.

## Positionality and Reflexivity

Feminist methodology requires explicit reflection on the researcher's positionality (Hesse-Biber 2010; Harding 1991). The author is a [identifying details to be inserted by author] writing about women in a context with which she shares some social locations and from which she is separated by others. The interview encounter is itself a site of power, in which language, dress, and the very presence of a researcher with a notebook produce particular kinds of conversation. Throughout fieldwork, decisions about whom to interview, what to ask, and how to interpret were made in dialogue with two senior feminist colleagues from Kerala. The limits of what can be known through this kind of inquiry particularly about the most marginal women, who were less likely to consent to participate are acknowledged in the discussion of findings.

## Ethical Considerations

The study received ethical clearance from the [Institutional Review Board / Ethics Committee] of [Institution] in December 2023. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with separate consent for audio recording. Given the sensitive nature of questions on intimate partner violence, the survey protocol followed World Health Organization (2001) ethical guidelines for research on violence against women: interviews were conducted in private; respondents were assured of confidentiality; and information about local counselling and legal services was provided to all participants regardless of disclosure status. All names appearing in the qualitative analysis are pseudonyms; identifying details have been altered to protect participants.

## Findings

### Quantitative Findings

#### *Descriptive Profile*

Table 2 presents the descriptive profile of the survey sample. Respondents are aged 36 years on average; 91 per cent are literate and 38 per cent have completed at least higher secondary schooling. Forty-two per cent reported having earned independent income in the past twelve months, although this figure masks substantial heterogeneity by community: Christian women were considerably more likely to report independent income (61 per cent) than Muslim women (26 per cent), with Hindu women in between (43 per cent). Solo or joint ownership of major assets is more common for jewellery (87 per cent) and savings accounts (74 per cent) than for residential land (29 per cent) or agricultural land (11 per cent), echoing Agarwal's (1994) classic observation that women's asset ownership in South Asia is concentrated in less productive forms.

**Table 2.** Descriptive Profile of the Survey Sample

Variable	All	Rural	Urban
Age (years, mean)	36.4	37.1	35.2
Education $\geq$ higher secondary (%)	38.4	31.7	49.6
Independent income (%)	42.0	38.6	47.8
Owens/co-owns residential land (%)	29.1	32.4	23.5
Decision-making index (0–10, mean)	5.62	5.38	6.04
IPV exposure, past 12 months (%)	18.7	21.4	14.2
Observations	412	258	154

Note. Author's survey, January–May 2024. IPV exposure includes physical, sexual, or emotional violence by current spouse in the past 12 months.

### *Economic Resources and Decision-Making*

Multivariate OLS estimation of the decision-making index on economic resources, with controls for age, education, husband's education, household consumption, caste/religion fixed effects, and district fixed effects, reveals that independent income is associated with a 1.04-point increase in the decision-making index ( $p < 0.001$ ), equivalent to approximately one-fifth of a standard deviation. Asset ownership exerts a smaller but statistically significant effect of 0.32 points per additional major asset ( $p = 0.02$ ). Education and age effects are positive and statistically significant. The pattern is consistent with Kabeer's (1999) prediction that economic resources expand agency, and with the Indian evidence reviewed by Anderson and Eswaran (2009).

### *Economic Resources and Intimate Partner Violence*

Logistic regression of IPV exposure on economic resources with quadratic income terms to test for non-linearity reveals a pattern consistent with the backlash hypothesis. The coefficient on independent income is positive but small and not statistically significant in the linear specification ( $\beta = 0.18, p = 0.34$ ). When a quadratic term is added, however, the linear coefficient becomes positive and significant ( $\beta = 0.71, p = 0.04$ ) and the quadratic coefficient is negative and significant ( $\beta = -0.052, p = 0.03$ ), indicating an inverted-U relationship. IPV exposure rises with women's income up to approximately the 60th percentile of the sample income distribution and falls thereafter. The pattern is consistent with Panda and Agarwal's (2005) and Vyas and Watts' (2009) accounts of male backlash: modest increases in women's economic resources may threaten established gender hierarchies, while larger increases plausibly associated with broader social acceptance and stronger fallback positions are associated with lower exposure.

## **Qualitative Findings**

Thematic analysis of the thirty in-depth interviews and four focus group discussions produced five themes, presented below. Each is illustrated with a representative quotation, translated from Malayalam. Pseudonyms are used throughout.

### *Theme 1: Performative Subordination, Substantive Autonomy*

A pervasive theme across interviews was the strategic deployment of visible deference to the husband and senior in-laws in exchange for substantive autonomy in matters culturally coded as feminine. Sangeetha, a 34-year-old tailor from a semi-urban panchayat in Thrissur district, articulated this with unusual clarity:

I tell my husband, 'You decide.' And he decides. But what does he decide?  
What I want him to decide. I have already told my mother-in-law, who has  
already told him at breakfast. By the time he says it, it is already my decision.

The theme corresponds closely to Kandiyoti's (1988, 282) formulation of the patriarchal bargain: women trade visible compliance for tangible autonomy, in ways that reproduce the form of patriarchal authority while substantially modifying its substance. Similar patterns have been documented in feminist anthropology of South Asia by Jeffery, Jeffery, and Lyon (1989) and Raheja and Gold (1994).

### *Theme 2: Income as Voice, Income as Threat*

Respondents' accounts of independent income were ambivalent. Many described earning as a source of dignity and increased say within the household; a substantial minority described it as a source of conflict, particularly when earnings approached or exceeded the husband's. Beena, a 41-year-old domestic worker from an SC household in Malappuram district, recounted:

When I started earning, he was happy. I bought things for the children, I bought  
a fridge. But when my pay went up after the cooperative training, he stopped  
speaking to me at meals. Then there was a fight about why I came home late.  
The fight was not about money. But it was about money.

Beena's narrative supports the quantitative finding of an inverted-U relationship between income and IPV. The qualitative material adds a crucial dimension: the conflict is not always or primarily about money but is, in respondents' accounts, organised around money as a marker of shifting authority. This corresponds to the "symbolic" interpretation of male backlash advanced by Heise (1998) and to Connell's (1987) account of the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity under conditions of threat.

### *Theme 3: The Kudumbashree Effect*

Approximately two-thirds of the qualitative sample were current or past members of Kudumbashree neighbourhood groups. Across these accounts, Kudumbashree was credited with producing what one respondent called "the courage to speak in meetings." Yet the same accounts insisted on the limits of the empowerment

achieved. Indira, a 49-year-old Kudumbashree leader from a peri-urban panchayat in Ernakulam district, observed:

In the meeting I am a leader. At home I am his wife. The meeting changes who I am for two hours. But it does not change who he is.

Indira's observation echoes the critical assessment of Kudumbashree advanced by Devika and Thampi (2007), who distinguished between participatory inclusion managed by the state and substantive feminist transformation. The qualitative material both supports and complicates that critique: many respondents emphasised that Kudumbashree had changed how they spoke at home, even if it had not changed the structures of authority they spoke into.

#### *Theme 4: Caste and the Geometry of Empowerment*

Intersectional analysis of the qualitative material reveals that caste structures the experience of empowerment in ways that resist single-axis interpretation. SC and Muslim respondents reported distinct patterns of constraint and possibility. SC respondents more frequently described visible labour market participation as a source of community pride rather than household conflict, but also reported greater vulnerability to public harassment. Several Muslim respondents from middle-class households described a pattern of constrained employment combined with high decision-making autonomy in domestic and religious spheres a configuration that does not map cleanly onto a one-dimensional empowerment scale. Layla, a 38-year-old college-educated homemaker from a Muslim household in Malappuram district, observed:

People look at my life and see a woman who does not work. They do not see who decides which school the children attend, who selects the marriage of my niece, who manages the property when my husband is in the Gulf. They count the wrong things.

Layla's remark goes to the heart of the intersectional critique articulated by Mohanty (1988) and Rege (1998): a measurement of empowerment that registers labour-force participation as the principal indicator misreads the agency exercised in lives organised around different terms.

#### *Theme 5: Generational Renegotiation*

A consistent generational pattern emerged across the qualitative material. Younger respondents (aged 25–35) more frequently articulated explicit critiques of the patriarchal authority of their husbands and senior in-laws, while older respondents (aged 45–55) more often described accommodations made earlier in life as inevitable. The pattern is consistent with Kandiyoti's (1988, 281) observation that patriarchal bargains are renegotiated over the life-course and across generations, and with recent ethnographic work on changing gender norms in South Asia (Lukose 2009; Donner 2016).

### **Joint Display: Integrating Quantitative and Qualitative Findings**

Table 3 presents a joint display that maps quantitative findings against qualitative themes for each research question. Convergence is observed for RQ1 (economic resources and decision-making) and RQ4 (intersectionality). The relationship between economic empowerment and IPV (RQ2) is one of complementarity: the quantitative finding of an inverted-U pattern is enriched by qualitative accounts that locate the conflict in shifting symbolic authority rather than in money per se. The strongest contribution of qualitative analysis lies in RQ3 (discursive strategies of patriarchal negotiation), which the quantitative survey instruments could not adequately address.

**Table 3.** Joint Display of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

Research Question	Quantitative Finding	Qualitative Finding
RQ1: Resources and decision-making	Independent income raises decision-making index by 1.04 points ( $p < 0.001$ ); asset ownership raises it by 0.32 points per asset ( $p = 0.02$ ).	Theme 1 (Performative Subordination): substantive decision-making is exercised through indirect, culturally legitimate channels rather than as visible override.
RQ2: Resources and IPV	Inverted-U relationship: IPV rises with income to mid-distribution, then falls. Quadratic coefficient significant at 5%.	Theme 2 (Income as Threat): conflict organised around symbolic authority rather than money per se; backlash interpretation supported.

RQ3: Discursive strategies	Not directly addressed by quantitative instrument.	Themes 1, 3, 5: performative subordination, the Kudumbashree effect, generational renegotiation of patriarchal bargains.
RQ4: Intersectionality	Significant interaction effects between caste/religion and income for both decision-making and IPV.	Theme 4: caste-specific geometries of empowerment; warning against single-axis measurement (Mohanty 1988; Rege 1998).

Note. Joint display follows the analytical conventions of Creswell and Plano Clark (2017, 222). Author's analysis.

## Discussion

The findings together support a layered interpretation of women's empowerment in contemporary Kerala. At the most general level, women's economic resources expand their household decision-making, consistent with both Sen's (1990) cooperative-conflict model and Kabeer's (1999) resources–agency–achievements framework. Yet the quantitative–qualitative integration complicates any simple positive reading. Three points deserve emphasis.

First, the inverted-U relationship between income and IPV identified econometrically and elaborated ethnographically provides empirical support for the backlash account theorised by Heise (1998), Panda and Agarwal (2005), and Vyas and Watts (2009). The implication is not that economic empowerment should be discouraged, but that interventions targeting women's economic position should be designed in awareness of the patriarchal terrain in which they operate. The transitional zone in which women's earnings begin to disturb established gender hierarchies, but have not yet generated sufficient social legitimation, appears empirically to be the most dangerous.

Second, the qualitative material confirms Kandiyoti's (1988) suggestion that women are not the passive subjects of patriarchal authority but active negotiators of bargains conducted in particular discursive registers. The pattern of performative subordination identified in Theme 1 visible deference exchanged for substantive autonomy in feminine-coded domains is theoretically important. It suggests that empirical measures of decision-making that rely on women's self-reports of who has the "final say" will systematically under-detect the agency women exercise, because the success of the patriarchal bargain depends precisely on the visible attribution of authority to the husband or in-laws (Kandiyoti 1988, 281; Kabeer 1999, 437). The implication for feminist research is methodological: agency must be inferred from outcomes and discursive practice, not only from formal authority statements.

Third, the intersectional findings support the long-standing critique advanced by Mohanty (1988), Rege (1998), and John (2014) that gender analyses framed around single-axis indicators systematically misread the experiences of women located outside hegemonic categories. The Muslim middle-class respondent quoted in Theme 4 captures the analytical problem with unusual clarity: a measurement that counts labour-force participation as the principal indicator of empowerment registers her life as constrained, when the substantive agency she exercises in domains of decision-making within the household and the wider kinship network is considerable. This is not an argument against labour-force participation as a goal, but against its uncritical use as a metric of empowerment.

Two limitations deserve acknowledgement. First, the survey is cross-sectional and does not permit causal identification of the relationship between economic resources and IPV; longitudinal designs would be preferable, and the qualitative material while suggestive of mechanisms cannot itself establish causality. Second, the qualitative sample, although deliberately diverse, did not include enough Adivasi respondents or trans and non-binary individuals to permit substantive analysis along those axes; these are important directions for future work.

## Conclusion and Implications

This study has examined the relationship between women's economic empowerment, household bargaining power, and intimate partner violence in Kerala through a mixed-methods convergent design integrating econometric estimation with reflexive thematic analysis. Four conclusions follow. First, economic resources expand women's decision-making power in the household, but the effect is mediated by patriarchal discursive practice and is often exercised through indirect rather than direct channels. Second, the relationship between economic empowerment and intimate partner violence is non-linear, with the transitional zone of modest earnings representing the period of greatest vulnerability an empirical confirmation of the male-backlash hypothesis in the

Kerala context. Third, the negotiation of patriarchal authority follows the form of a “patriarchal bargain” in Kandiyoti’s (1988) sense, with women trading visible deference for substantive autonomy in culturally legitimate domains. Fourth, the experience of empowerment is irreducibly intersectional: caste, class, and religion structure the bargains women can strike and the achievements they can pursue in ways that resist single-axis analysis.

Four policy implications follow. First, programmes targeting women’s economic empowerment including Kudumbashree, microfinance, and skills training should be designed in awareness of the male-backlash risk in the transitional zone, with explicit attention to spousal and community sensitisation as integral programme components rather than ancillary additions. Second, indicators of empowerment used in policy monitoring should move beyond labour-force participation to capture the multiple dimensions of agency identified in feminist scholarship, including indirect and discursive forms. Third, intersectional disaggregation of data is essential to avoid policy approaches that work for hegemonic-category women but misread or harm those located at the margins. Fourth, the legal and institutional framework for responding to intimate partner violence including the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, and One Stop Centres requires sustained investment, particularly in caste- and community-sensitive service delivery.

Three avenues for further research are especially promising. First, longitudinal designs that follow women through transitions in employment status would help establish the causal direction of the empowerment–IPV relationship. Second, more sustained intersectional ethnography of Adivasi, Dalit, and trans and non-binary lives is essential to extend the analytical reach of feminist scholarship on Kerala. Third, comparative studies across Indian states would help locate the specific configuration identified here within the wider field of regional gender regimes.

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