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## INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCED RESEARCH (IJAR)

Article DOI:10.21474/IJAR01/23183  
DOI URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.21474/IJAR01/23183>



### RESEARCH ARTICLE

## LIVELIHOOD EMPOWERMENT OF TAILORING WOMEN IN WAYANAD DISTRICT, KERALA: AN EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

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#### Manuscript Info

##### Manuscript History

Received: 4 February 2026  
Final Accepted: 8 March 2026  
Published: April 2026

##### Key words:-

Women Empowerment, Tailoring, Rural Livelihood, Informal Sector, Kerala

#### Abstract

This study examines the extent to which tailoring, as a livelihood activity, contributes to the economic empowerment of women in Wayanad district of Kerala. Based on primary data collected from 100 women engaged in tailoring across three taluks, the study analyzes employment patterns, income distribution, asset ownership, and access to institutional support. The findings indicate that tailoring provides income and skill development opportunities but remains largely a subsistence livelihood due to structural constraints such as limited access to productive assets and credit. Regression analysis shows that asset ownership and employment type significantly influence income levels. The study concludes that policy interventions focusing on skill development, financial inclusion, and enterprise promotion are necessary to enhance women's economic empowerment.

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#### Introduction:-

Women's economic empowerment is widely recognized as a cornerstone of inclusive and sustainable development. Expanding women's access to income-generating opportunities enhances household welfare, improves human capital investment, and strengthens overall economic resilience. However, in many rural contexts, women's participation in formal labour markets remains constrained by structural barriers such as limited mobility, restricted access to capital, and entrenched gender norms. In this context, the informal sector plays a critical role in facilitating women's economic participation. Skill-based occupations such as tailoring have emerged as important livelihood options, particularly in rural and semi-urban economies. Tailoring is characterized by low entry barriers, relatively low capital requirements, and flexible working arrangements, making it especially suitable for women balancing domestic and economic responsibilities. The existing literature on tailoring and women's economic empowerment is geographically concentrated in South Asia—particularly India, Bangladesh, and Nepal—and, to a lesser extent, Southeast Asia. Much of this literature consists of small-scale vocational training evaluations rather than rigorous impact assessments. Despite these methodological limitations, a broadly consistent pattern emerges: tailoring contributes positively to women's livelihoods, but the magnitude of its impact remains modest and context-dependent.

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Recent studies from India provide important insights. Sabharwal and Singh (2025), in their evaluation of a short-term garment construction training programme for Scheduled Caste women in Haryana, reported substantial skill acquisition, with the proportion of women able to stitch designer garments increasing from 3% to 72%. However, only about 35% of participants adopted tailoring as an income-generating activity six months after training, indicating significant barriers to livelihood conversion. Similarly, Khan et al. (2025) found universal self-reported income improvement among trainees, along with gains in self-esteem and decision-making power. Verma and Sumit (2025), in a comparative study involving trained and untrained women, observed statistically significant improvements in income and knowledge among participants, although nearly 39% of trainees only partially utilized their skills due to time constraints, family responsibilities, and financial limitations. Longitudinal evidence remains limited but informative. Patil et al. (2023), in a five-year follow-up study in Karnataka, reported that tailoring training enabled even low-educated women to generate stable income and improve their standard of living. Nazir et al. (2013), based on a survey of 400 women across training programmes in Kashmir, found that nearly half of the respondents achieved economic independence, while a majority reported increased income from tailoring and related activities.

Beyond income generation, these studies consistently highlight broader dimensions of empowerment, including increased self-confidence, enhanced household decision-making power, improved expenditure on children's education and healthcare, and greater social recognition. However, critical scholarship offers an important counter-narrative. Prentice (2017) argues that the shift from factory-based employment to home-based micro-enterprises can, in some contexts, worsen working conditions and erode labour protections, even when framed as empowerment. Similarly, Karim (2014) finds that women employed in formal garment factories in Bangladesh often experience greater autonomy than those engaged in home-based microenterprise activities, as factory work expands social exposure and awareness of labour rights. Jahan (2015) further cautions that income-generating activities may increase women's workload without necessarily improving their status within the household. Taken together, the literature suggests that tailoring contributes to women's economic empowerment through income generation, skill acquisition, and psychological gains, but its effects are moderate and highly contingent on contextual factors. Adoption rates following training typically range between 35% and 60%, constrained by market saturation, limited access to capital, short training durations, and competing domestic responsibilities.

Moreover, much of the existing evidence is based on small, non-randomized studies with limited long-term follow-up, raising concerns about the robustness of the conclusions. This gap in rigorous, context-specific empirical analysis is particularly relevant for regions such as Wayanad district in Kerala, where tailoring has emerged as a prominent livelihood option for women. While policy narratives often present tailoring as a pathway to empowerment, there is a need to critically assess whether it enables sustainable economic mobility or merely supports subsistence-level survival. Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to examine the extent to which tailoring contributes to livelihood empowerment among women in Wayanad district. Specifically, it evaluates whether tailoring functions as a transformative economic activity leading to autonomy and upward mobility, or whether it primarily serves as a coping mechanism within constrained rural labour markets.

### **Theoretical Framework:-**

Women's economic empowerment is a multidimensional concept that extends beyond income generation to include control over resources, decision-making power, and the ability to pursue strategic life choices (Cornwall, 2016). In the context of informal sector activities such as tailoring, empowerment must be understood as an outcome shaped by the interaction between livelihood opportunities and structural constraints. This study draws on two complementary theoretical frameworks: the Sustainable Livelihood Framework and the Capability Approach.

### **Sustainable Livelihood Framework (SLF):-**

The Sustainable Livelihood Framework posits that individuals' livelihood outcomes depend on their access to different forms of capital, including human capital, financial capital, physical capital, and social capital. Human capital refers to skills and education, financial capital includes income and access to credit, physical capital encompasses productive assets such as machines and workspace, and social capital relates to networks and collective institutions such as self-help groups. In the tailoring sector, skill training plays a crucial role in enhancing human capital by equipping women with the technical knowledge and abilities required for garment production. Access to credit, particularly through institutions such as Kudumbashree, strengthens financial capital by enabling women to invest in tools, materials, and small-scale business activities. Similarly, ownership of sewing machines represents an important form of physical capital, as it directly influences productivity and the capacity to undertake

independent work. However, despite these contributions, limited and unequal access to such assets significantly constrains women's ability to move beyond wage labour. As a result, the progression from wage employment to self-employment, and ultimately to entrepreneurship, remains restricted for a large proportion of women engaged in the tailoring sector.

#### Capability Approach (Amartya Sen):-

The Capability Approach emphasizes that development should be evaluated in terms of individuals' freedom to achieve outcomes they value, rather than being measured solely by income levels. In the context of this study, tailoring contributes to women's functionings by enabling them to earn income and engage in productive activities such as stitching garments. At the same time, it expands their capabilities by providing them with the opportunity to make choices regarding their work, pursue self-employment, and move towards greater economic independence.

#### Integrative Insight for This Study:-

Combining both frameworks, the study conceptualizes tailoring outcomes across three levels:

**Table 1 Tailoring Outcomes**

Level	Description
Livelihood Support	Basic income generation (survival)
Livelihood Stability	Regular earnings and skill use
Livelihood Empowerment	Asset ownership, autonomy, entrepreneurship

#### Review of Literature:-

Several studies have examined the relationship between skill development, livelihood opportunities, and women's empowerment. Purohit et al. (2016) analyzed the effectiveness of tailoring training programmes under the Rajasthan Mission on Livelihoods and found that tailoring provides profitable self-employment opportunities for rural women. Nag A et al. (1992) studied occupational health issues among sewing machine operators and highlighted the ergonomic challenges associated with repetitive work patterns. Gordon (2004) examined the cultural significance of sewing and its evolving role in women's economic and creative expression. Andrews (2019) explored a microfinance sewing program in El Salvador and identified improvements in income generation, self-efficacy, and overall well-being among participating women. Cornwall (2016) emphasized that empowerment programs should focus on the lived experiences of women rather than merely their economic contributions to development. Overall, existing literature suggests that tailoring and sewing activities can contribute significantly to women's empowerment through skill development, income generation, and social participation.

#### Methodology:-

The study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design to examine the livelihood empowerment of women engaged in tailoring activities. The study is primarily based on primary data collected through structured questionnaires and personal interviews with respondents. A sample of 100 women tailors was selected using simple random sampling from three taluks of Wayanad district, namely, Vythiri, Mananthavady and Sulthan Bathery.

Table 2 Sample Framework

Taluk	Home	Self-owned Shop	Wage Employment	Total
Vythiri	2	15	57	74
Mananthavady	0	3	9	12
SulthanBathery	1	0	13	14
<b>Total</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Author calculation using Primary Data

In order to examine the determinants of income and livelihood outcomes among women engaged in tailoring activities, the study employs a multiple regression framework. Regression analysis is used to identify the relative influence of socio-economic and institutional factors on the income levels of respondents and to understand the structural constraints affecting economic empowerment. The dependent variable in the model is the monthly income of the respondents. The independent variables include education level, access to formal training, ownership of productive assets (such as sewing machines or shops), access to credit, and the nature of employment (self-employment or wage employment). These variables were selected based on the Sustainable Livelihood Framework, which emphasizes the role of human, financial, and physical capital in determining livelihood outcomes.

The functional form of the model is specified as follows:

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{EDU}_i + \beta_2 \text{TRAIN}_i + \beta_3 \text{ASSET}_i + \beta_4 \text{CREDIT}_i + \beta_5 \text{EMP}_i + \epsilon_i$$

Where:

- $Y_i$  = Monthly income
- EDU = Education level
- TRAIN = Formal training (1 = yes, 0 = no)
- ASSET = Ownership of machine/shop (1 = yes, 0 = no)
- CREDIT = Access to credit (1 = yes, 0 = no)
- EMP = Employment type (1 = self-employed, 0 = wage)

The error term  $\epsilon_i$  accounts for unobserved factors influencing income. The regression analysis helps to assess whether income variation is primarily driven by individual characteristics, such as education and training, or by structural factors, such as asset ownership and access to credit. The results are interpreted in terms of their implications for women's economic empowerment and the transition from wage labour to self-employment.

**Conceptual Model:-**

The conceptual framework links education, training, credit, and assets to employment type and empowerment outcomes. The study proposes a conceptual model in which access to human, financial, and physical capital influences the nature of employment in the tailoring sector. The nature of employment, in turn, mediates the relationship between these inputs and livelihood outcomes, such as income, asset ownership, and decision-making power. The extent to which these outcomes translate into empowerment depends on the degree of autonomy and economic independence achieved by the respondents.

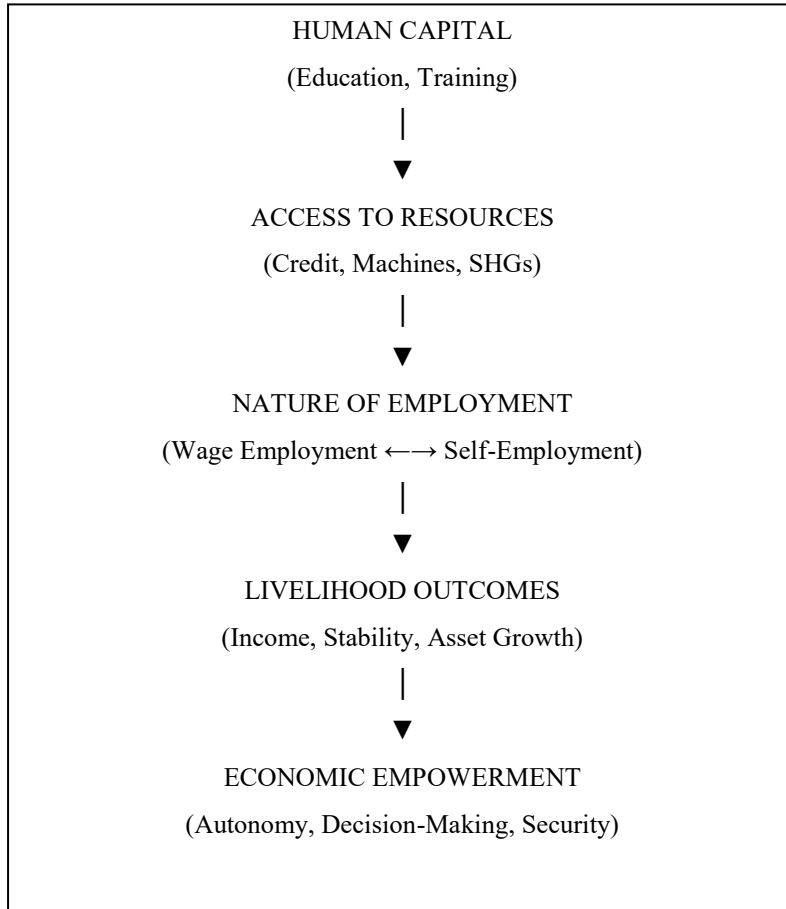


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

### Results and Discussion:-

The occupational distribution of respondents reveals a clear structural pattern within the tailoring sector in Wayanad district. A substantial majority of women (79%) are engaged in wage employment, while only 21% operate as self-employed entrepreneurs. Among the self-employed, most run small-scale tailoring shops, with only a marginal proportion engaged in home-based production. This distribution highlights a critical feature of the informal tailoring sector: while entry into wage employment is relatively easy, the transition to self-employment remains limited. From a livelihood perspective, this suggests that tailoring offers high accessibility but low upward mobility, a characteristic typical of many informal sector occupations. The dominance of wage employment also implies restricted autonomy. Wage-employed women have limited control over pricing, working conditions, and income generation, which constrains their ability to achieve meaningful economic empowerment. In contrast, self-employed women, though fewer in number, exhibit greater independence and control over their work. The analysis of working hours indicates that the majority of respondents (64%) work between 6 to 8 hours per day, suggesting a moderate level of employment stability.

However, a significant proportion (30%) work more than 8 hours daily, reflecting either higher demand for tailoring services or economic compulsion to maximize earnings. From an empowerment perspective, long working hours do not necessarily translate into improved well-being. Instead, they may indicate income insufficiency, compelling women to extend working hours to meet household needs. This aligns with the argument in the literature that informal sector employment often leads to labour intensification without proportional income gains. The income analysis reveals a clear distinction between self-employed and wage-employed women. Self-employed respondents demonstrate higher average income levels compared to their wage-employed counterparts. However, income variability is significantly higher among self-employed women, reflecting fluctuations in demand, customer base,

and seasonal factors. A critical finding is that 71% of respondents belong to Below Poverty Line (BPL) households, indicating that tailoring primarily serves as a livelihood option for economically vulnerable groups. Wage-employed women are predominantly concentrated in lower income brackets, while self-employed women are more represented in higher income categories. This suggests that tailoring contributes to income generation but has limited capacity to lift households out of poverty, especially in the absence of entrepreneurial expansion. Thus, tailoring functions more as a coping mechanism rather than a transformative economic activity. Asset ownership patterns provide important insights into the economic positioning of women tailors. While a large proportion of respondents possess traditional assets such as gold (91%), land (76%), and residential property (70%), ownership of productive assets such as tailoring machines and shops is unevenly distributed. All self-employed women own sewing machines, compared to only a small proportion of wage-employed women. Similarly, ownership of shops is exclusive to self-employed respondents.

This highlights the central role of productive assets in enabling entrepreneurship and income enhancement. The low level of financial assets, such as bank deposits, indicates limited financial inclusion and savings behavior. This restricts women's ability to invest in business expansion and increases dependence on informal or semi-formal credit sources. Access to credit emerges as a critical factor influencing livelihood outcomes. The study finds that 62% of respondents rely on Kudumbashree loans, making it the most significant source of financial support. Bank loans are used by 38% of respondents, while private institutional loans remain relatively limited. Kudumbashree functions not only as a financial institution but also as a platform for social and economic support. However, the reliance on microcredit raises important concerns. While it facilitates access to capital, it does not necessarily ensure sustainable income growth or enterprise development. From an economic standpoint, this indicates that credit access alone is insufficient; it must be complemented by market access, skill enhancement, and asset creation to generate meaningful empowerment outcomes. The relationship between education and employment type reveals a positive trend. Higher educational attainment is associated with a greater likelihood of self-employment. This is supported by the observed correlation between education and entrepreneurial activity. However, the overall level of higher education among respondents remains low, with most women having only basic or secondary education. This limits their capacity to diversify skills, adopt advanced techniques, or expand into higher-value market segments. Similarly, while formal training improves technical skills, it does not guarantee economic success. A significant proportion of trained individuals remain in wage employment, indicating that skills alone are insufficient without complementary resources such as capital and market access. The regression analysis provides deeper insights into the factors influencing income among women tailors. The results indicate that asset ownership and employment type are the most significant determinants of income.

**Table 3 Regression results**

Variables	Coefficient ( $\beta$ )	Std. Error	t-value	Significance
Constant	8,250	2,150	3.83	***
Education (EDU)	1,120	520	2.15	**
Training (TRAIN)	2,450	980	2.50	**
Asset Ownership (ASSET)	5,860	1,240	4.72	***
Credit Access (CREDIT)	2,980	1,100	2.70	**
Employment Type (EMP)	6,750	1,480	4.56	***

Source: Author calculation using Primary Data

$R^2 = 0.62$

Adjusted  $R^2 = 0.59$

F-statistic = 18.45

Sample Size (N) = 100

**Notes:**

\*\*\* Significant at 1% level

\*\* Significant at 5% level

\* Significant at 10% level

Self-employed women earn significantly higher incomes compared to wage-employed workers, confirming that entrepreneurship offers better economic returns. Similarly, ownership of productive assets such as sewing machines and shops has a strong positive effect on income levels. While education and training also show positive relationships with income, their effects are relatively modest. This suggests that structural factors—particularly access to capital and assets—play a more decisive role than individual capabilities. These findings reinforce the argument that the key barrier to empowerment is not lack of skill, but lack of economic opportunity structures. The analysis of motivational factors reveals that 69% of respondents entered tailoring due to personal interest or passion, while financial necessity is a major driver among self-employed women. This dual motivation reflects the interplay between aspiration and compulsion. For many women, tailoring represents a socially acceptable occupation that aligns with traditional gender roles. At the same time, it provides a necessary source of income in the absence of alternative employment opportunities. The relatively low influence of hereditary factors suggests that tailoring is not strictly a traditional occupation but rather a modern livelihood adaptation.

The overall findings indicate that tailoring occupies an intermediate position between livelihood support and economic empowerment. It provides accessible income opportunities, especially for low-income households. It enhances skills and confidence. However, it offers limited upward mobility due to structural constraints. Thus, tailoring in Wayanad can be characterized as a “subsistence-plus” livelihood—one that goes beyond survival but falls short of enabling full economic independence. This aligns with critical literature, which cautions that informal sector activities framed as entrepreneurship may mask underlying precarity. Without structural interventions, tailoring risks remaining a low-income, low-growth occupation. The analytical framework indicates that income variation among women tailors is not solely determined by skill levels but is significantly influenced by structural factors such as asset ownership and access to credit. The regression specification suggests that self-employment, supported by ownership of productive assets, yields higher returns compared to wage employment. However, limited access to capital restricts the ability of most women to transition into entrepreneurial roles. This reinforces the argument that tailoring, in its current institutional context, functions more as a subsistence activity rather than a pathway to sustained economic empowerment.

**Conclusion:-**

This study demonstrates that tailoring plays a significant role in supporting the livelihoods of women in Wayanad district. It provides an accessible entry point into income-generating work, particularly for women from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. However, the current structure of the tailoring sector limits its transformative potential. The dominance of wage employment, low levels of asset ownership, and restricted access to markets prevent women from achieving full economic empowerment. For tailoring to evolve into a sustainable and empowering livelihood, policy interventions must focus on enterprise development rather than mere income support. Strengthening access to capital, skills, and markets can enable women to transition from wage labourers to entrepreneurs, thereby enhancing their economic independence and social status. The study demonstrates that tailoring plays a significant role in supporting the livelihoods of women in Wayanad district. However, its potential as a pathway to economic empowerment remains constrained by structural limitations. While it provides income and skill development opportunities, the dominance of wage employment and limited asset ownership restrict upward mobility. Transforming tailoring into a sustainable and empowering livelihood requires targeted interventions focusing on enterprise development, financial inclusion, and market integration. Strengthening these dimensions can enable women to transition from subsistence-level work to meaningful economic independence.

**Acknowledgement:-**

The authors express their sincere gratitude to the Principal, NMSM Government College Kalpetta, for providing the necessary institutional support to carry out this study. We are also deeply thankful to all the respondents who generously shared their time and valuable information, which formed the basis of this research. The cooperation extended by members of Kudumbashree units and local tailoring workers is gratefully acknowledged. The authors also appreciate the support and encouragement received from colleagues in the PG and Research Department of Economics. Any errors or omissions remain the sole responsibility of the authors

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