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Financial inclusion, rural entrepreneurship and women's empowerment: Insights from the SVEP experience in Kerala

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ABSTRACT

The Start-up Village Entrepreneurship Programme (SVEP), a sub-scheme under DAY-NRLM, aims to promote rural entrepreneurship by addressing gaps in financial access, business skills, and incubation support. This study evaluates the program's impact in three districts of Kerala Wayanad, Thiruvananthapuram, and Kottayam, reflecting diverse socio-economic contexts. Using a quantitative approach, data was collected from 364 respondents across these districts to assess SVEP's effectiveness in advancing financial inclusion, fostering entrepreneurship, and enhancing socio-economic outcomes. Key findings reveal that SVEP significantly contributed to financial literacy, accessibility to credit, and income generation. The program enhanced access to credit, especially through the Community Enterprise Fund (CEF). SVEP also fostered knowledge, business skills, and personal empowerment, as reflected in improved well-being, life satisfaction, and social status among respondents. Despite these successes, challenges such as low male and youth participation and disparities in financial ecosystem enhancements were identified. The study recommends targeted interventions to address these gaps, including improved credit utilization, advanced financial literacy programs, sector-specific training, and inclusive strategies to support underrepresented groups. Future research should focus on longitudinal assessments and cross-state comparisons to guide national scaling efforts.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana-National Rural Livelihood Mission (DAY-NRLM), launched in 2011 by the Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, is a flagship programme aimed at poverty alleviation [1]. It seeks to enable poor households to access gainful self-

employment and thereby stabilising and enhancing livelihoods. The Start-up Village Entrepreneurship Programme (SVEP), a sub-scheme under DAY-NRLM, was launched in 2015 to promote rural entrepreneurship in non-farm sectors [2]. It seeks to address gaps in knowledge, incubation, and finance ecosystems, particularly for first-generation entrepreneurs.

Key features of SVEP include:

1. Comprehensive training for entrepreneurs to help them establish and sustain enterprises.
2. Facilitating start-up funding (Community Enterprise Fund) through Block Level Community Based Organisations of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and linking entrepreneurs with banks for additional financial support.
3. Providing handholding support during the critical initial six months of enterprise establishment.
4. Developing a cadre of Community Resource Persons for Enterprise Promotion (CRP-EPs) to provide grassroots-level business advisory and support.

The programme focuses on developing sustainable rural enterprises across manufacturing, trading, and services, leveraging ICT tools for capacity building, enterprise advisory services, and financial facilitation. The SVEP Programme is implemented in selected blocks across India over a duration of 4-5 years, with an average financial allocation of Rs. 5-6 crore per block. Of this, approximately Rs. 2.5 crore is designated as Community Enterprise Funds (CEF) to support the establishment of around 2,000 rural micro-enterprises during the implementation period.

2.0 SVEP IN KERALA

Kudumbashree is the poverty eradication and women empowerment programme implemented by the State Poverty Eradication Mission (SPEM) of the Government of Kerala. Kudumbashree functions as the State Rural Livelihood Mission under DAY-NRLM and serves as the nodal agency for implementing the SVEP project in the State. In the first phase, Kudumbashreehas successfully executed the SVEP program in 14 blocks of the State in two batches. The first batch initiated during 2016-17 included Vadavukode (Ernakulam) and Parakode (Pathanamthitta) blocks. The second batch initiated in preceding years and included Vaikom (Kottayam), Panamaram (Wayanad), Nenmara (Palakkad), Neeleswaram (Kasargod), Thycattussery (Alappuzha), Vamanapuram (Trivandrum), Perambra (Kozhikode), Idukki (Idukki), Pathanapuram (Kollam), Kodakara (Thrissur), Kuthuparamba (Kannur) and Nilambur (Malappuram) blocks. Over the years, SVEP has empowered women entrepreneurs in Kerala by providing essential training for setting up rural enterprises and by facilitating financial support through Self Help Groups (SHGs) and banking institutions. The program has successfully promoted more than 30,000 microenterprises [3] in the State by 2025, contributing significantly to economic opportunities at the grassroots level. With this

importance, a study was conducted to assess the impact of the interventions implemented under the SVEP programme in Kerala State.

3.0 OBJECTIVES

The study aims to assess the impact of Start-up Village Entrepreneurship Programme (SVEP) in advancing financial inclusion, fostering entrepreneurship, and promoting socioeconomic transformation among rural women in Kerala. The specific objectives are:

1. To examine the socio-economic and demographic characteristics of rural women entrepreneurs supported under SVEP in Kerala.
2. To evaluate the extent of financial inclusion achieved through SVEP, with particular focus on access to microfinance, credit utilisation and financial literacy.
3. To assess the livelihood transitions, economic outcomes, and empowerment gains, both personal and entrepreneurial, resulting from SVEP interventions.
4. To derive policy-relevant recommendations for strengthening the design and effectiveness of SVEP in Kerala.

4.0 ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Although this study was not designed as a hypothesis-driven evaluation, its descriptive analysis is guided by key conceptual propositions drawn from programme theory and prior empirical literature. These propositions provide a structured lens for interpreting observed patterns and assessing the perceived outcomes of the Start-up Village Entrepreneurship Programme (SVEP) in Kerala. The study primarily employs aggregate, percentage-based analysis, thereby excluding the application of inferential statistical tests, such as t-tests or regression models. Instead, the following guiding propositions provide analytical coherence to the descriptive inquiry and delineate potential avenues for future hypothesis-driven research.

4.1 Guiding Propositions

1. SVEP participation is associated with measurable improvements in the income levels of rural women entrepreneurs.
2. SVEP participation contributes to enhanced financial literacy, improved credit access, and increased confidence in financial management among women entrepreneurs.
3. SVEP participation fosters entrepreneurial skill development, business knowledge, and attitudinal shifts towards self-employment.
4. The impact of SVEP on income, empowerment, and enterprise performance varies across districts due to demographic, geographic, and institutional differences.

These propositions are not statistically tested but are assessed descriptively through comparative trends across the three study districts: Wayanad, Thiruvananthapuram, and Kottayam. The analysis interprets these trends in light of the propositions, providing policy-relevant insights and conceptual grounding for future hypothesis-based evaluations.

5.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

5.1 Previous Studies on SVEP

India's focus on rural development has led to the implementation of numerous entrepreneurship programs aimed at fostering self-employment and financial independence among rural populations. Some key programs include Pradhan Mantri MUDRA Yojana (PMMY), Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDUGKY), RSETI (Rural Self Employment Training Institutes) scheme, Make in India, Skill India, Start-Up India, Pradhan Mantri Van Dhan Yojana (PMVDY), NABARD, Rajiv Gandhi Udyami Mitra Yojana (RGUMY) and One District One Product (ODOP). The Start-up Village Entrepreneurship Programme (SVEP), launched in 2015 under DAY-NRLM, targets rural entrepreneurship by addressing gaps in knowledge, incubation, and financing ecosystems. The SVEP programme has been evaluated across various blocks and states by different organisations, revealing the following findings: SVEP has been instrumental in connecting entrepreneurs to financial resources such as SHG-linked loans, community enterprise funds, and institutional credit. However, access to MUDRA loans remains limited, and first-generation entrepreneurs face challenges in securing financial support [4]. The evaluation of Dhupguri, Manikchak and Dinhata Blocks in West Bengal highlights SVEP's effectiveness in promoting rural entrepreneurship and generating employment. The program improved financial access through CRP-EPs, enabling better credit sourcing and financial management among entrepreneurs. However, barriers like limited market linkages and inadequate branding opportunities persist. Studies have documented significant improvements in income levels and employment generation among SVEP beneficiaries [5].

According to the studies by Indian Institute of Entrepreneurship, women constitute a significant portion of SVEP beneficiaries, with studies showing 53-75% of enterprises led by women. This has enhanced their financial independence and social standing, although cultural barriers persist [6]. Most enterprises established under SVEP demonstrate profitability and growth potential. However, limited market access and branding opportunities restrict scalability. Community Resource Persons for Enterprise Promotion (CRP-EPs) have played a vital role in mentoring and providing business advisory services [6]. Despite its success, SVEP faces challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, limited financial literacy, and difficulties in maintaining operational sustainability for Block Resource Centres (BRCs) [6]. SVEP created an incubation ecosystem that helps first-time entrepreneurs with aspects like business planning, risk assessment, and working capital management. This peer-to-peer learning among entrepreneurs is a notable mechanism for reducing the high failure rate of start-ups in rural context [7]. As per the study [8], the programme has demonstrated significant improvements in household incomes, employment generation, and social empowerment, particularly among marginalized communities. However, regional disparities highlight the need for localized strategies and policies.

The Literature Review indicates that SVEP has played a significant role in improving financial access and management for rural entrepreneurs, with a particular focus on women-led

enterprises. The programme has contributed to enhancing household incomes, fostering enterprise growth, and strengthening institutional credit linkages through mechanisms such as the Community Enterprise Fund (CEF). However, challenges like low levels of financial literacy, inadequate market linkages, and the operational sustainability of Block Resource Centres remain, pointing to the need for focused interventions. While evaluations of SVEP have been conducted in states such as West Bengal, Telangana, and Assam, a comprehensive study examining its impact in Kerala has been lacking. This highlights the relevance of the present study.

5.2 Rural Women Entrepreneurship in Kerala

While Kerala State is known for its high literacy rates, achieving rural economic empowerment remains a significant task. Initiatives like Kudumbashree have played a crucial role in promoting entrepreneurship. Although no studies have been conducted specifically to evaluate the SVEP programme in Kerala, various general studies have highlighted key obstacles and supportive factors in promoting rural entrepreneurship. These findings provide valuable insights into the challenges and enablers of such initiatives, as detailed below. Early studies by Anna and Pillai [9] noted a reliance on state financial aid among women entrepreneurs, underscoring the importance of family encouragement while highlighting reluctance toward dynamic ventures. Studies such as those by Narayana and Gopakumar [10] revealed a lack of professional training, limited knowledge of financial management, and poor marketing skills as persistent barriers. Entrepreneurs often prefer home-based activities due to space constraints, further limiting scalability. Research by John [11] found that over 60% of Kudumbashree microenterprises were unsustainable, primarily due to insufficient entrepreneurial traits among SHG members and intense market competition. Additionally, subpar product quality, inadequate advertising, and lack of branding were significant challenges. Abraham [12] highlighted Kudumbashree's strategy of identifying social needs and converting them into viable business opportunities, which significantly enhanced the success of microenterprises. SHGs play a vital role in facilitating access to capital, training, and networking opportunities, empowering women entrepreneurs [13]. Participation in SHGs has led to greater financial inclusion, social acceptance, and leadership skills [14].

Studies by Mathew [15] and Sunandha [16] emphasized the importance of entrepreneurial competency, motivation, and education in determining the success of women-led enterprises. Entrepreneurs with semi-urban backgrounds, direct raw material sourcing, and professional management approaches exhibited higher success rates. Recent studies by Bonny, Lokesh, and Smitha [17] and Thamizhvel and Shambu [18] stressed the importance of adopting technology, digital marketing skills, and standardized processes in achieving entrepreneurial success. The literature on Kudumbashree highlights its key role in promoting rural entrepreneurship and empowering women in Kerala. Studies have pointed out challenges like inadequate financial management, lack of professional training, and limited market access, which hinder the sustainability of microenterprises. At the same time, initiatives such as using SHGs to improve financial inclusion and identifying social needs as business opportunities have shown

positive outcomes. Recent research has also stressed the importance of adopting technology and improving marketing practices to enhance enterprise success. Despite the state's unique socio-economic context and initiatives like Kudumbashree, there has been limited research on the specific challenges and opportunities faced by rural women entrepreneurs under SVEP. The present study addresses a critical gap by evaluating the impact of the Start-up Village Entrepreneurship Programme (SVEP) on rural women entrepreneurship in Kerala.

6.0 METHODOLOGY

6.1 Research Design and Context

This research is part of a larger state-level end-term evaluation of the Start-up Village Entrepreneurship Programme (SVEP) conducted by the Centre for Management Development (CMD) for Kudumbashree Mission, the State Rural Livelihoods Mission (SRLM) of Kerala. The evaluation was conducted in accordance with the Terms of Reference (ToR) established by the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD), Government of India, which delineated the standardised framework for all state-level assessments under the Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana- National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NRLM). While the larger CMD study evaluates the implementation of the SVEP in all fourteen blocks in Kerala, this paper, on the other hand, only looks at the numbers related to certain indicators like financial inclusion and women empowerment from three representative districts: Wayanad, Thiruvananthapuram, and Kottayam. These districts were intentionally selected to exemplify the state's regional diversity (northern, southern, and central Kerala) and to reflect variations in demographic, geographic, and enterprise characteristics. The study utilises a quantitative descriptive evaluation design, concentrating on quantifiable program outcomes associated with financial inclusion, enterprise performance, and women's empowerment.

6.2 Study Area

SVEP in Kerala is implemented through Kudumbashree's network of community-based organisations and Block Resource Centres (BRCs). The three selected Blocks: Panamaram Block in Wayanad, Vamanapuram Block in Thiruvananthapuram, and Vaikom Block in Kottayam, were chosen to reflect varied socio-economic conditions and enterprise profiles.

1. Wayanad, a highland and tribal-dominated district, represents economically vulnerable and geographically remote areas where access to financial institutions is relatively limited.
2. Thiruvananthapuram, a coastal and semi-urban district, reflects service-oriented enterprise ecosystems.
3. Kottayam, a central midland district with relatively higher literacy and financial inclusion levels, represents diversified trading and service enterprises.

This stratified geographical representation guarantees that the findings reflect Kerala's regional diversity and provide insights pertinent to the state.

6.3 Sampling Technique and Sample Size

The Terms of Reference (ToR) framework of Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD) guided the sampling process. It called for stratified proportional random sampling to make sure that all geographic and enterprise variables were fairly represented. Within each chosen district, businesses were divided into groups based on their Gram Panchayat, type of business (manufacturing, trade, or services), and age. This made sure that both new and old businesses were represented equally. Using Cochran's formula [19] for large populations, a statistically valid sample was taken from the number of active SVEP enterprises in each block. This gave enough accuracy for descriptive evaluation. The final sample consisted of 364 women entrepreneurs, allocated as follows:

- Wayanad (Panamaram Block): 96 respondents
- Thiruvananthapuram (Vamanapuram Block): 139 respondents
- Kottayam (Vaikom Block): 129 respondents

The sample size and its proportional distribution across blocks ensured representation that aligned with the ToR's stipulations for geographical diversity, enterprise variety and operational scale.

6.4 Data Collection Tools and Sources

The primary data for the study were collected through a structured questionnaire developed and administered by CMD. The questionnaire was developed based on the indicator framework and areas of inquiry specified in the MoRD Terms of Reference for the End-Term Evaluation of SVEP (2019). It included the three thematic ecosystems that support the design of SVEP's programs:

1. Knowledge ecosystem: assessing training, business knowledge, and entrepreneurial skills;
2. Incubation ecosystem: assessing enterprise support, mentoring, and performance; and
3. Financial ecosystem: assessing credit access, loan repayment, and financial literacy.

The survey captured the entrepreneurs' self-reported changes in income and empowerment, as well as their socio-economic status. It was tested beforehand in similar SVEP blocks to ensure clarity, cultural appropriateness, and validity of responses. Trained field investigators who were familiar with livelihoods and micro-enterprises surveys administered the questionnaire in Malayalam through in-person interviews during field visits that took place between January and March 2026. Secondary data from Detailed Project Reports (DPRs) programme MIS, and internal review documents were also used for validation and contextual understanding.

6.5 Reliability and Validity of the Instrument

To check for reliability, Cronbach's alpha was used to look at the responses from all three districts and see how consistent the major constructs were with each other. The values were

higher than the usual cut-off of 0.70, which meant that the internal consistency and measurement reliability were both good. (Cronbach's alpha values of various constructs provided as annexure 2) The MoRD ToR indicators and expert review by CMD's evaluation specialists and Kudumbashree officials ensured that the questionnaire's structure and content were valid.

6.6 Data Analysis Procedures

The quantitative data collected were encoded and input into SPSS for examination. Descriptive statistics and percentage analyses were used to look at entrepreneurs socio-economic traits, their access to finance, changes in their income, how well their businesses performed, and how empowered they felt personally. No inferential or causal statistical tests were utilised, as the study sought to elucidate descriptive trends and patterns rather than to evaluate hypotheses. The analysis framework adhered to the programme's theory of change, correlating enhancements in financial access, business acumen, and empowerment outcomes to SVEP participation.

6.7 Limitations

The study is confined to quantitative data obtained from structured surveys administered to SVEP-supported women entrepreneurs in three districts of Kerala. Self-reported responses may exhibit recall or social desirability bias; however, field verification and cross-checks were implemented to improve reliability. Because the design is descriptive instead of causal, the results provide evidence of program impact that is more indicative than generalisable.

7.0 ANALYSIS

7.1 Socio-economic Profile of Entrepreneurs

Understanding the socio-economic traits of SVEP beneficiaries sheds light on the program's primary audience and its effectiveness in incorporating women from various demographic and educational backgrounds. The information from Wayanad, Thiruvananthapuram, and Kottayam presented in the following tables shows clear patterns in each area and show the typical profile of the women entrepreneurs under SVEP in Kerala.

Table 1: *Age Distribution of Women Entrepreneurs under SVEP*

Age & District	18-24 (%)	25-34 (%)	35-44 (%)	45-54 (%)	55 & above (%)
Wayanad	**1**	**9**	**40**	**32**	**17**
Thiruvananthapuram	1	11	32	36	21
Kottayam	0	5	30	41	23

Source: Compiled from primary data

Women between the ages of 35 and 54 make up more than two-thirds of SVEP participants in all three districts, making them the most common type of entrepreneur. This pattern shows

that the program mostly involves women in their middle ages who are socially stable and have worked in the household or informal sector before. In contrast, the participation of younger women (under 25 years) is still very low (about 1%), showing that it is still hard to get young people interested in starting their own businesses in rural areas.

Table 2: ***Educational Attainment*** *of Women Entrepreneurs under SVEP*

Educational qualification & District	Middle/High School Education	10^{th} Std. Pass (%)	12^{th} Std. (%)	ITI/ Vocational	Graduation	Post Graduation & above
Wayanad	**17**	**45**	**22**	**1**	**13**	**3**
Thiruvananthapuram	13	40	31	2	9	5
Kottayam	14	44	27	1	13	2

Source: Compiled from primary data

Most of the respondents have finished secondary school (10th to 12th grade), and only a small number have gone on to higher or vocational education. This indicates that SVEP has successfully engaged women with limited educational backgrounds, a demographic frequently overlooked by conventional entrepreneurship development programs. The fact that Wayanad and Kottayam have a higher percentage of graduates (13% each) shows inclusion of educated women, through limited.

Table 3: ***Category*** *of Women Entrepreneurs under SVEP*

Category & District	OBC (%)	General (%)	SC/ST (%)
Wayanad	**50**	**46**	**4**
Thiruvananthapuram	72	25	3
Kottayam	47	48	6

Source: Compiled from primary data

Other Backward Classes (OBCs) make up the majority of entrepreneurs in Wayanad and Thiruvananthapuram (50% and 72%, respectively). In Kottayam, however, General-category women are slightly high in numbers than others (48%). The representation of Scheduled Castes and Tribes is still low (3-6 percent), which shows that there is room for more outreach to marginalised groups, especially in Wayanad, where tribal populations make up a large part of the district's population.

The socio-economic profile shows that SVEP in Kerala has been successful in mobilising middle-aged, moderately educated women from OBC backgrounds, but it still has challenges in expanding participation among younger, highly educated, and socially disadvantaged women. The pattern aligns with the program's community-based implementation model,

which relies more on the Kudumbashree network's existing members than on new entrants who are not already part of the SHG ecosystem.

7.2 Enterprise Characteristics

This section examines the key features of enterprises that were started as part of the Start-up Village Entrepreneurship Programme (SVEP) in the three study districts. The analysis presented in the tables below includes ownership type, age of enterprise and sectoral distribution to learn more about how mature, structured, and nature of business activities promoted among women entrepreneurs.

Table 4: ***Ownership Pattern of SVEP Enterprises***

Ownership pattern & District	Sole Proprietorship (%)	Group Enterprises (%)
Wayanad	**91**	**9**
Thiruvananthapuram	94	6
Kottayam	99	1

Source: Compiled from primary data

The enterprise profile shows that sole proprietorship is the most common type of business, making up more than 90% of enterprises in every district and almost all enterprises in Kottayam (99%). This pattern shows that SVEP is focused on helping women become self-employed. The program mainly helps women move from informal jobs to small-scale businesses. This approach promotes autonomy and income control, but it also suggests restricted collective enterprise development, an opportunity for growth through group-based or cooperative business models.

Table 5: ***Age of Enterprises***

Age of enterprises & District	Under 5 Years (%)	5-10 Years (%)	10-15 Years (%)	Above 15 years
Wayanad	**58**	**34**	**3**	**5**
Thiruvananthapuram	46	39	7	8
Kottayam	45	29	19	7

Source: Compiled from primary data

Most of the enterprises in all three districts are still young, having been in business for less than five years. This finding aligns with the implementation timeline of SVEP, which began in Kerala during 2016-17. Wayanad has the highest percentage of new businesses (58%), which shows that many people have started new businesses in the recent project cycles. Kottayam, on the other hand, has a significant percentage of older businesses (19% in the 10-15-year range), which suggests that SVEP has also helped existing micro-enterprises grow and consolidate.

Table 6: *Sector of SVEP Enterprises*

Sector & District	Trade (%)	Services (%)	Manufacturing (%)
Weaned	**45**	**42**	**13**
Thiruvananthapuram	36	31	33
Kottayam	33	36	31

Source: Compiled from primary data

In Wayanad, trade-based activities like retail, small shops, and selling small goods make up 45% of the economy. This shows that the district's market is more consumer oriented. Thiruvananthapuram, on the other hand, has a more even mix of manufacturing (33%), trade (36%), and services (31%), which suggests a more developed entrepreneurial ecosystem linked to urban markets. Kottayam also has a mixed structure, with similar representation across sectors. However, service businesses (36 percent) slightly outnumber manufacturing and trading businesses. Evidence indicates that SVEP has helped people branch out into non-farm rural businesses in all three regions. However, the scale is still mostly micro-level and individual. Strengthening market connections, encouraging value addition, and supporting group entrepreneurship could make these women-led businesses more sustainable and profitable.

7.3 Financial Inclusion and Credit Access

The Start-up Village Entrepreneurship Programme (SVEP) is based on the idea of financial inclusion. Its goal is to help women get institutional credit and feel more confident about managing their finance. This section as depicted in the following tables looks at how entrepreneurs use credit, such as how much they take out, where they get their finance, and how they pay it back. It also looks at how their financial literacy and access to money have improved since the program.

Table 7: *Credit Sourcing Status among SVEP Entrepreneurs*

Loan availed & District	Loan Availed (%)	Loan Not Availed (%)
Wayanad	**52**	**48**
Thiruvananthapuram	46	54
Kottayam	12	88

Source: Compiled from primary data

The data show that women entrepreneurs are making clear but uneven progress in getting credit. In Wayanad, a little more than half of the entrepreneurs (52 percent) had taken out loans, which shows that they were actively using financial institutions. Thiruvananthapuram came in second with 46 percent, while Kottayam had a much lower uptake (12 percent). This

could mean that there is not much demand for loans or that there are problems with getting loans, despite a more developed financial environment in the State.

Table 8: *Primary Sources of Credit for SVEP Enterprises*

Loan source & District	Wayanad (%)	Thiruvananthapuram (%)	Kottayam (%)
Community Enterprise Fund from SVEP	**55**	**77**	**50**
Loan from Cooperative Banks	28	8	3
Mudra Loan	2	6	8
NHG Internal Loan	5	3	11
Loan from Private Sector Banks	4	1	3
Loan from Nationalised Banks	4	3	24
Loan from Private Money Lenders	0	0	3
Loan from State Government Institutions	3	3	0

Source: Compiled from primary data

The Community Enterprise Fund (CEF), which was set up by SVEP, became the most popular and most accessible credit across districts. It helped more than three-quarters of borrowers in Thiruvananthapuram and about half in Wayanad and Kottayam. This underscores the centrality of the CEF as a bridge between self-help group-based credit and formal banking. Cooperative and nationalized banks made up 30% of loans in Wayanad, but much smaller percentages in other places. Private or informal sources, like moneylenders or personal networks, did not play a big role, which shows that people are moving toward institutional finance.

Table 9: *Loan Repayment Performance by Source*

Type of Loan	Wayanad			Thiruvananthapuram			Kottayam		
Timely Paying (%)	Closed (%)	Default (%)	Timely Paying (%)	Closed (%)	Default (%)	Timely Paying (%)	Closed (%)	Default (%)	
Community Enterprise Fund (SVEP)	48	51	1	48	51	1	79	19	2
Community Investment Fund/NHG Internal Loan	67	33	0	0	100	0	100	0	0
Mudra Loan	56	44	0	56	44	0	67	33	0
Loan from Cooperative Banks	82	18	0	91	9	0	100	0	0

Type of Loan	Wayanad			Thiruvananthapuram			Kottayam		
Loan from Private Sector Banks	40	60	0	40	60	0	100	0	0
Loan from Nationalised Banks	100	0	0	100	0	0	89	11	0
Loan from State Government Institutions	25	75	0	25	75	0	0	0	0
Loan from Private Money Lenders	0	0	0	0	0	0	100	0	0

Source: Compiled from primary data

The repayment performance across all sources was very good, with rates of timely or completed repayment above 90 percent in almost all categories and default levels below 2 percent. These results show that borrowers are responsible and that it is possible to give micro-enterprise credit through community-linked systems.

Table 10: *Financial Literacy and Accessibility before and after SVEP (Mean Scores)*

Indicators & Districts	Wayanad		Thiruvananthapuram		Kottayam	
Pre SVEP	Post SVEP	Pre SVEP	Post SVEP	Pre SVEP	Post SVEP	
Financial Literacy (Mean Score)	3.86	4.04	3.5	3.88	3.48	4.2
Accessibility to Credit Sources (Mean Score)	3.81	4	3.48	3.89	3.49	4.21
Availability of Loan (Mean Score)	3.81	3.97	3.51	3.9	3.48	4.2

Source: Compiled from primary data

Mean-score analysis of financial literacy and accessibility indicators further emphasises SVEP's developmental impact. Post-programme, scores went up in every district, with Kottayam showing the biggest improvements (Financial Literacy 3.48 → 4.20; Credit Accessibility 3.49 → 4.21). Wayanad and Thiruvananthapuram have seen improvements, though they are smaller, that show that structured training and exposure through SVEP helped women better understand, access, and manage financial services. These results show that SVEP has played a decisive role in promoting financial inclusion and responsible credit behaviour among rural women and include women in the financial system. The regional differences in loan uptake, especially the low borrowing in Kottayam, show that more training and credit counselling are needed to ensure that women in all districts utilise financial opportunities more equally.

7.4 Income and Livelihood Impact

A key objective of the Start-up Village Entrepreneurship Programme (SVEP) is to help women shift from low-income, wage-based, or agricultural livelihoods toward enterprise-based self-employment. This section looks at how SVEP has changed the income levels and livelihoods of women entrepreneurs in the three study districts. It compares the pre- and post-programme outcomes and checks their alignment with aspirational income targets.

Table 11: *Primary Source of Livelihood after SVE*

Source of livelihood & District	SVEP Enterprise (%)	Wages from other sources (%)	Agriculture & Allied activities (%)	Rent/Remittances /Other income (%)
Wayanad	**96**	**1**	**3**	**0**
Thiruvananthapuram	84	10	5	1
Kottayam	86	11	3	0

Source: Compiled from primary data

In all study districts, SVEP has become the principal source for most respondents to make a living. Almost all of the women entrepreneurs in Wayanad (96 percent) reported that SVEP enterprises were their main source of income, and they did not rely much on farming or wage work. Thiruvananthapuram (84 percent) and Kottayam (86 percent) had similar but slightly lower patterns, showing a shift from traditional jobs to being self-reliant as an entrepreneur.

Table 12: *Average Annual Enterprise Income Compared with Aspirational Income Benchmarks*

Income & District	Higher Than Aspirational Income (%)	Lower Than Aspirational Income (%)
Wayanad	**68.64**	**31.36**
Thiruvananthapuram	52.11	47.89
Kottayam	1.36	98.64

Source: Compiled from primary data

Comparing the performance of enterprises to inspirational income benchmarks (₹10,000 per month according to DPR targets) shows that there is a lot of variation between districts. More than two-thirds (68.6 percent) of enterprises in Wayanad exceeded their aspirational income, which shows that they had good business outcomes and effective project support. In Thiruvananthapuram, a little over half (52 percent) of businesses met or exceeded their goals. In Kottayam, on the other hand, only 1 percent of businesses met or exceeded their goals. This suggests that enterprises are growing at different rates and that the dynamics of institutions or markets may be different in different areas.

Table 13: *Distribution of Annual Enterprise Income*

Annual Income Range & Districts	Wayanad (%)	Thiruvananthapuram (%)	Kottayam (%)
Less than Rs. 25,000	**17**	**30**	**9**
Rs.25,000 - Rs.50,000	17	18	13
Rs.50,000-Rs.1 Lakh	21	16	33
Rs.1 Lakh-Rs.3 Lakh	29	25	25
Rs.3 Lakh-Rs. 5 Lakh	8	7	9
Rs.5 Lakh- Rs.10 Lakh	6	3	8
Above Rs.10 Lakh	3	2	1

Source: Compiled from primary data

The overall distribution of income makes sharp differences. Wayanad has a good mix of income levels, with most businesses making between Rs. 1 lakh and Rs. 3 lakh a year. Thiruvananthapuram has a polarised pattern, with a lot of low-income businesses (less than Rs. 25,000) coexisting with moderate-income businesses. Kottayam, despite its underperformance relative to aspirations, has a higher concentration of businesses in the middle-income range (Rs. 50,000-Rs. 1 lakh).

Table 14: *Monthly Income of Entrepreneurs before and after SVEP*

Monthly income range & Districts	Wayanad		Thiruvananthapuram		Kottayam	
Pre-SVEP (%)	**Post-SVEP (%)**	**Pre-SVEP (%)**	**Post-SVEP (%)**	**Pre-SVEP (%)**	**Post-SVEP (%)**	
Rs. 0-5,000	63	29	70	56	72	44
Rs.5,000-10,000	9	23	11	18	12	22
Rs.10,000-20,000	10	19	10	13	7	15
Rs.20,000-50,000	11	15	6	10	6	11
Rs.50,000-1,00,000	4	9	2	2	2	5
Above Rs.1 Lakh	3	4	1	1	1	2

Source: Compiled from primary data

Comparing women's incomes before and after the program shows a clear upward trend in all districts. The number of women who earned very little (less than Rs. 5,000 per month) fell sharply. In Wayanad, it went from 63% to 29%, in Thiruvananthapuram, it went from 70% to 56%, and in Kottayam, and it went from 72% to 44%. In every district, the percentage of entrepreneurs making more than Rs. 10,000 per month more than doubled, which shows that SVEP has a real effect on the economy.

Table 15: *Perceived Income Contribution of SVEP*

Income & District	Income of Entrepreneur attributed to SVEP (%)	Income of Enterprise attributed to SVEP (%)	Household Income attributed to SVEP (%)
Wayanad	**98.6**	**99**	**98**
Thiruvananthapuram	80.2	80.3	79.2
Kottayam	96.7	94.9	96.9

Source: Compiled from primary data

Perceptual data further corroborate that nearly all respondents in Wayanad and Kottayam, and over 80 percent in Thiruvananthapuram, directly attributed their income enhancements to SVEP interventions. This shows strong beneficiary confidence in the programme's role in enhancing both individual and household incomes.

The evidence collectively indicates that SVEP has played a substantial role in income augmentation and livelihood diversification, facilitating women's transition from unstable, low-wage employment to more sustainable entrepreneurial ventures. The differences between districts, on the other hand, show how important local market factors, credit utilisation, and ongoing business mentoring are for ensuring consistent income growth across all regions.

7.5 Entrepreneurial Knowledge and Skills

The Start-up Village Entrepreneurship Programme (SVEP) also aims to improve the business skills of rural women by enhancing their knowledge of business operations, financial management, and record-keeping practices. This section looks at how being a part of SVEP has changed the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of women business owners in the three study districts.

Table 16: *Improvements in Entrepreneurial Knowledge, Skills, and Attitude (Mean Scores)*

Indicators & Districts	Wayanad (Mean)	Thiruvananthapuram (Mean)	Kottayam (Mean)
Knowledge about industry, entrepreneurship, and running a business improved	**4.15**	**3.85**	**4.2**
Business skills have improved	3.94	3.9	4.18
Positive attitude toward entrepreneurship	3.98	3.85	4.2
Confidence in maintaining financial records	3.94	3.86	4.15

Source: Compiled from primary data

The findings indicate that SVEP-supported women in all three districts consistently improved their entrepreneurial knowledge and skills, with mean scores between 3.85 and 4.20. Most of the women agreed that the program enhanced their understanding of business operations, financial management, and record-keeping. Wayanad made big strides in business knowledge and attitude (means above 4.0), reflecting effective training and mentoring support from CRP-

EPs. Thiruvananthapuram, on the other hand, made moderate but steady progress, which means that business advisory help is still needed. Kottayam had the highest overall scores (about 4.2), which means that the training was better understood and used in real life. This is probably because the district has a higher literacy rate and more exposure to the market. SVEP has clearly made both the cognitive and attitudinal aspects of entrepreneurship stronger in all districts. It has taught women professionalism, confidence, and a more positive view of self-employment as a viable and sustainable way to make a living.

Table 17: *Financial Management Competency Level*

Financial Management Competency Level	Wayanad (%)	Thiruvananthapuram (%)	Kottayam (%)
Basic Financial Awareness with Support Needs	**31**	**46**	**52**
Functional Financial Understanding for Daily Operations	50	32	13
Proficient Financial Management and Budgeting	18	15	31
Advanced Strategic Financial Planning Skills	1	8	5

Source: Compiled from primary data

The results show that SVEP-supported women are getting better at financial management competencies, which is a good sign for financial empowerment across districts. In Wayanad, half of the women showed that they had a good financial understanding. Eighteen percent were good at budgeting, and a small group (1 percent) was starting to show advanced planning skills. Thiruvananthapuram had the most women with advanced financial skills (8%), as well as 32% who managed their finance independently and 46% who needed more help with basic money management. In Kottayam, financial literacy was still in its early stages, with 52% needing help. However, 31% were good at budgeting, and 5% had learned how to plan strategically. Overall, many entrepreneurs still need structured help with financial planning. However, the presence of women with progressively higher financial competencies shows SVEP's effectiveness in helping rural women entrepreneurs to become more confident and better at managing their finance.

7.6 Personal Empowerment Outcomes

The Start-up Village Entrepreneurship Programme (SVEP) has been instrumental in improving women's social status, self-confidence, and overall well-being, beyond economic and financial achievements. SVEP entrepreneurship not only provides an income source, but it also changes how they see their roles in their families and communities. This section looks at important signs of personal empowerment, such as better quality of life, social status, social skills, and overall life satisfaction.

Table 18: *Impact of SVEP on Personal Empowerment*

Indicator & Districts	Wayanad (Mean)	Thiruvananthapuram (Mean)	Kottayam (Mean)
Quality of life has improved	**4.35**	**4**	**3.9**
Social status/acceptance has increased	4.35	4.03	3.83
Social Skills have developed	4.22	3.99	3.73
Overall well-being and life satisfaction have improved	4.37	3.96	3.94

Source: Compiled from primary data

The findings indicate that SVEP has significantly and positively influenced women's personal empowerment in all three districts, with mean scores between 3.73 and 4.37, signifying a consensus that their quality of life, social status, and confidence have enhanced through entrepreneurship. Women in Wayanad saw the notable progress, with improvements in well-being (4.37) and social recognition (4.35), which meant that their living standards and mental health got better. Thiruvananthapuram showed steady but moderate progress across all indicators, with improvements in social skills, self-efficacy, and decision-making ability. Kottayam also had positive outcomes, respondents acknowledging a better quality of life. However, there was less change in leadership visibility, which may be because they were already in a better position. The findings collectively affirm that SVEP has facilitated multidimensional empowerment encompassing self-esteem, autonomy, and community participation, thereby enabling women to assume more active roles in financial decisions, and in household while attaining respect and mobility.

8.0 DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION OF KEY FINDINGS

8.1 Financial Empowerment and Inclusion

The results show that SVEP has improved women's financial inclusion in Kerala by expanding access to institutional credit and boosting their confidence in managing their finance. The Community Enterprise Fund (CEF) functioned as the main credit channel, effectively bridging the gap between women start-ups with community banking systems. High repayment rates (exceeding 90 per cent) reflect responsible borrowing behaviour and validate the community-linked lending model promoted nationally under SVEP [6] (Ministry of Rural Development [MoRD], 2019). Across districts, especially in Kottayam, scores for financial literacy and accessibility have gone up. This suggests that Community Resource Persons' financial training and mentoring have helped women plan and manage their business finances better. Overall, SVEP has shifted rural women from limited, consumption-based borrowing to productive, enterprise-oriented financial engagement, reinforcing the broader goals of Kudumbashree's inclusive financial ecosystem [20].

8.2 Entrepreneurial Development and Performance

The study reveals that SVEP has contributed substantially to strengthening women's entrepreneurial capacities and improving enterprise performance across the study districts. The prevalence of sole proprietorships and the increasing diversity of trade, service, and manufacturing entities suggest that the program has cultivated a sustainable ecosystem for individual entrepreneurship within the Kudumbashree framework. The steady increase in average scores for business knowledge and confidence in managing finance shows that the Community Resource Persons - Enterprise Promotion (CRP-EPs) network's structured training and mentoring have improved both cognitive and practical skills. These outcomes align with the objectives of the Ministry of Rural Development's (MoRD, 2019) SVEP guidelines, which emphasise knowledge incubation and local capacity-building as key determinants of micro-enterprise sustainability. The present study validates that higher levels of business skill and confidence correspond with better enterprise performance, particularly in Kottayam and Wayanad. However, the differences between districts in performance level show that different strategies are needed to deal with differences in how well enterprises do in different districts. Improving market connections, digital marketing skills, and cluster-based business models could help businesses make more profit in the long run. Overall, SVEP has grown from a credit-linked program into a capacity-building platform that helps women become better entrepreneurs, makes micro-enterprise operations more professional, and sets the stage for long-term growth of rural businesses in Kerala.

8.3 Income Enhancement and Livelihood Transition

The results confirm that SVEP has led to measurable income enhancement and livelihood diversification among rural women entrepreneurs in Kerala. The fact that the number of ultra-low earners has dropped sharply and the number of people earning more than Rs. 10,000 per month has risen at the same time in all districts shows that household income levels are rising. These gains are most evident in Wayanad, where a majority of enterprises exceeded aspirational income benchmarks, which suggests that business maturity and mentoring support have led to higher profits. This pattern aligns with findings from the Indian Institute of Entrepreneurship [6] national evaluation, which reported that sustained handholding and follow-up support significantly improve enterprise survival and income stability under SVEP.

The fact that most respondents' main source of income is from enterprises shows that the economy is moving from relying on farming or wage labour to self-employment. Such transformation is consistent with the Ministry of Rural Development's (MoRD, 2019) emphasis on developing non-farm livelihood opportunities to strengthen rural economic resilience. The differences in income levels between districts show how market reach and local demand can vary from one place to another. However, the overall evidence shows that SVEP has successfully promoted income security, self-reliance, and sustainable livelihoods, especially for women who were previously confined to subsistence-based activities.

8.4 Social and Personal Empowerment

The study findings highlight that SVEP's impact extends beyond economic gains, contributing significantly to women's social recognition, self-confidence, and overall empowerment. The fact that women have more control over their lives and decisions in families and communities shows how entrepreneurship has improved their quality of life and social acceptance. Women in all three districts reported greater control over their household finances and were more involved in community activities. This shows a shift from dependency to leadership, indicating that SVEP enhanced women's visibility in local governance and augmented their participation in collective decision-making.

In Kerala's context, where Kudumbashree already provides a strong platform for women's participation, SVEP has deepened this empowerment process by linking financial independence with social mobility. The most obvious benefits were seen in Wayanad, where entrepreneurs from poor and socially vulnerable backgrounds reported higher improvements in well-being and community respect. In general, SVEP has fostered multidimensional empowerment, including economically, socially, and psychologically. This shows that giving people access to finance and support for community-based enterprises can be a powerful instrument for gender roles transformation in rural areas.

9.0 CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

9.1 Conclusion

The study concludes that the Start-up Village Entrepreneurship Programme (SVEP) has brought about significant economic and social advantages for women entrepreneurs in Kerala. The program has helped women move from informal or subsistence jobs to viable micro-enterprises by giving them access to low-cost credit, teaching them new skills, and providing community-based support through the Kudumbashree network. The analysis across three districts demonstrates a consistent enhancement in financial inclusion, enterprise performance, income levels, and multidimensional empowerment. Although variations exist in scale and outcomes across district, the overall evidence shows that SVEP has helped women become more financially independent, better at starting their own businesses, and able to move up in society, which supports Kerala's goal of inclusive growth.

The descriptive findings broadly support the conceptual propositions that guided this study. Across all three districts, improvements in income, financial literacy, and entrepreneurial confidence among women entrepreneurs affirm the positive association between SVEP participation and economic empowerment (Propositions 1 and 2). Proposition 3 is supported by better business knowledge, skills, and self-perception, which confirmed the programme's role in strengthening entrepreneurial capability. Proposition 4, which expects differences between districts, is also supported, enterprise income was much higher in Wayanad, while financial literacy gains were highest in Kottayam, showing how the program's results were affected by the context. While these results do not demonstrate causality without inferential testing, they furnish indicative empirical support for the guiding propositions and present a coherent interpretive framework for policy-oriented conclusions.

9.2 Policy and Practice Implications

The results show that SVEP needs to build on its successes while also filling in the gaps in outreach and business support. First, inclusivity needs to be expanded by getting younger, better-educated, and socially marginalised women (SC/ST and OBC groups) to take part. To get a more balanced group of participants, there could be outreach campaigns at the district level, partnerships with schools, and youth-focused incubation programs.

Second, mentoring that is specific to a sector and the promotion of collective or group enterprises can improve business performance. This is especially true in service and trade oriented sectors where working together makes businesses more visible and resilient in the market. Low-income businesses could grow by strengthening their connections to the market, getting help with branding and joining local value chains.

Third, the financial ecosystem requires further deepening. Making the Community Enterprise Fund (CEF) easier to use, offering more credit counselling, and encouraging cooperation between cooperative and commercial banks would all help women get more credit and invest more. Fourth, adding structured training in digital finance and financial literacy to SVEP's capacity-building modules would help women feel more confident about budgeting, making digital payments, and keeping track of their business finances. These are all important skills for Kerala's increasingly digital economy.

Fifth, it is important to keep investing in advanced entrepreneurship and leadership training. Customised training modules in business planning, digital marketing, and strategic management would enhance women's capacity to grow businesses and take on leadership positions in community organisations. These measures will ensure that the empowerment gained through SVEP evolves into institutional leadership.

9.3 Limitations and Future Research

This study is based on cross-sectional, survey-based data from three districts and focuses primarily on descriptive analysis. Although the results offer strong evidence of SVEP's efficacy, causal links between particular interventions and outcomes could not be statistically verified. Future research should adopt longitudinal or mixed-method designs to examine enterprise survival, income progression, and empowerment trajectories over time. Comparative assessments among states and experimental investigations into financial literacy or mentoring interventions could elucidate the determinants affecting women's entrepreneurial performance and the scalability of programs.

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