

# 1 Livelihood Empowerment of Tailoring 2 Women in Wayanad District, Kerala: An 3 Empirical Analysis.

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## 4 **Abstract**

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

15 **Keywords:** Women Empowerment, Tailoring, Rural Livelihood, Informal Sector, Kerala

## 16 **1. Introduction**

17 Women's economic empowerment is widely recognized as a cornerstone of inclusive and  
18 sustainable development. Expanding women's access to income-generating opportunities  
19 enhances household welfare, improves human capital investment, and strengthens overall  
20 economic resilience. However, in many rural contexts, women's participation in formal labour  
21 markets remains constrained by structural barriers such as limited mobility, restricted access to  
22 capital, and entrenched gender norms. In this context, the informal sector plays a critical role in  
23 facilitating women's economic participation. Skill-based occupations such as tailoring have  
24 emerged as important livelihood options, particularly in rural and semi-urban economies.  
25 Tailoring is characterized by low entry barriers, relatively low capital requirements, and flexible  
26 working arrangements, making it especially suitable for women balancing domestic and  
27 economic responsibilities.

28 The existing literature on tailoring and women's economic empowerment is geographically  
29 concentrated in South Asia—particularly India, Bangladesh, and Nepal—and to a lesser extent  
30 Southeast Asia. Much of this literature consists of small-scale vocational training evaluations  
31 rather than rigorous impact assessments. Despite methodological limitations, a broadly consistent  
32 pattern emerges: tailoring contributes positively to women's livelihoods, but the magnitude of its  
33 impact remains modest and context-dependent.

34 Recent studies from India provide important insights. Sabharwal & Singh (2025) in their  
35 evaluation of a short-term garment construction training programme for Scheduled Caste women

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

50 Beyond income generation, these studies consistently highlight broader dimensions of  
51 empowerment, including increased self-confidence, enhanced household decision-making power,  
52 improved expenditure on children's education and healthcare, and greater social  
53 recognition. However, critical scholarship offers an important counter-narrative. Prentice (2017)  
54 argues that the shift from factory-based employment to home-based micro-enterprises can, in  
55 some contexts, worsen working conditions and erode labour protections, even when framed as  
56 empowerment. Similarly, Karim (2014) finds that women employed in formal garment factories  
57 in Bangladesh often experience greater autonomy than those engaged in home-based  
58 microenterprise activities, as factory work expands social exposure and awareness of labour  
59 rights. Jahan (2015) further cautions that income-generating activities may increase women's  
60 workload without necessarily improving their status within the household.

61 Taken together, the literature suggests that tailoring contributes to women's economic  
62 empowerment through income generation, skill acquisition, and psychological gains, but its  
63 effects are moderate and highly contingent on contextual factors. Adoption rates following  
64 training typically range between 35% and 60%, constrained by market saturation, limited access  
65 to capital, short training durations, and competing domestic responsibilities. Moreover, much of  
66 the existing evidence is based on small, non-randomized studies with limited long-term follow-  
67 up, raising concerns about the robustness of the conclusions.

68 This gap in rigorous, context-specific empirical analysis is particularly relevant for regions such  
69 as Wayanad district in Kerala, where tailoring has emerged as a prominent livelihood option for  
70 women. While policy narratives often present tailoring as a pathway to empowerment, there is a  
71 need to critically assess whether it enables sustainable economic mobility or merely supports  
72 subsistence-level survival. Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to examine the extent to  
73 which tailoring contributes to livelihood empowerment among women in Wayanad district.  
74 Specifically, it evaluates whether tailoring functions as a transformative economic activity  
75 leading to autonomy and upward mobility, or whether it primarily serves as a coping mechanism  
76 within constrained rural labour markets.

77 **2. Theoretical Framework**

78 Women’s economic empowerment is a multidimensional concept that extends beyond income  
79 generation to include control over resources, decision-making power, and the ability to pursue  
80 strategic life choices (Cornwall, 2016). In the context of informal sector activities such as  
81 tailoring, empowerment must be understood through the interaction between livelihood  
82 opportunities and structural constraints. This study draws on two complementary frameworks:

83 **2.1 Sustainable Livelihood Framework (SLF)**

84 The Sustainable Livelihood Framework posits that individuals’ livelihood outcomes depend on  
85 their access to different forms of capital: Human capital (skills, education), Financial capital  
86 (income, credit access), Physical capital (machines, workspace), and Social capital (self-help  
87 groups, networks)

88 In the tailoring sector, skill training plays a crucial role in enhancing human capital by equipping  
89 women with the technical knowledge and abilities required for garment production. Access to  
90 credit, particularly through institutions such as Kudumbashree, contributes to strengthening  
91 financial capital by enabling women to invest in tools, materials, and small-scale business  
92 activities. Similarly, ownership of sewing machines represents an important form of physical  
93 capital, as it directly influences productivity and the capacity to undertake independent work.  
94 However, despite these contributions, limited and unequal access to such assets significantly  
95 constrains women’s ability to move beyond wage labour. As a result, the progression from wage  
96 employment to self-employment, and ultimately to entrepreneurship, remains restricted for a  
97 large proportion of women engaged in the tailoring sector.

98 **2.2 Capability Approach (Amartya Sen)**

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

106 **2.3 Integrative Insight for This Study**

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

108 **Table 1 Tailoring Outcomes**

<b>Level</b>	<b>Description</b>
Livelihood Support	Basic income generation (survival)

Level	Description
Livelihood Stability	Regular earnings and skill use
Livelihood Empowerment	Asset ownership, autonomy, entrepreneurship

### 109 3. Review of Literature

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

### 124 4. Methodology

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

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**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

Taluk	Home	Self-owned Shop	Wage Employment	Total
Total	3	18	79	100

131 *Source: Author calculation using Primary Data*

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133 In order to examine the determinants of income and livelihood outcomes among women engaged  
 134 in tailoring activities, the study employs a multiple regression framework. Regression analysis is  
 135 used to identify the relative influence of socio-economic and institutional factors on the income  
 136 levels of respondents and to understand the structural constraints affecting economic  
 137 empowerment.

138 The dependent variable in the model is the monthly income of the respondents. The independent  
 139 variables include education level, access to formal training, ownership of productive assets (such  
 140 as sewing machines or shops), access to credit, and the nature of employment (self-employment  
 141 or wage employment). These variables were selected based on the Sustainable Livelihood  
 142 Framework, which emphasizes the role of human, financial, and physical capital in determining  
 143 livelihood outcomes.

144 The functional form of the model is specified as follows:

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 EDU_i + \beta_2 TRAIN_i + \beta_3 ASSET_i + \beta_4 CREDIT_i + \beta_5 EMP_i + \epsilon_i$$

145 **Where:**

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

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

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## 5. 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.

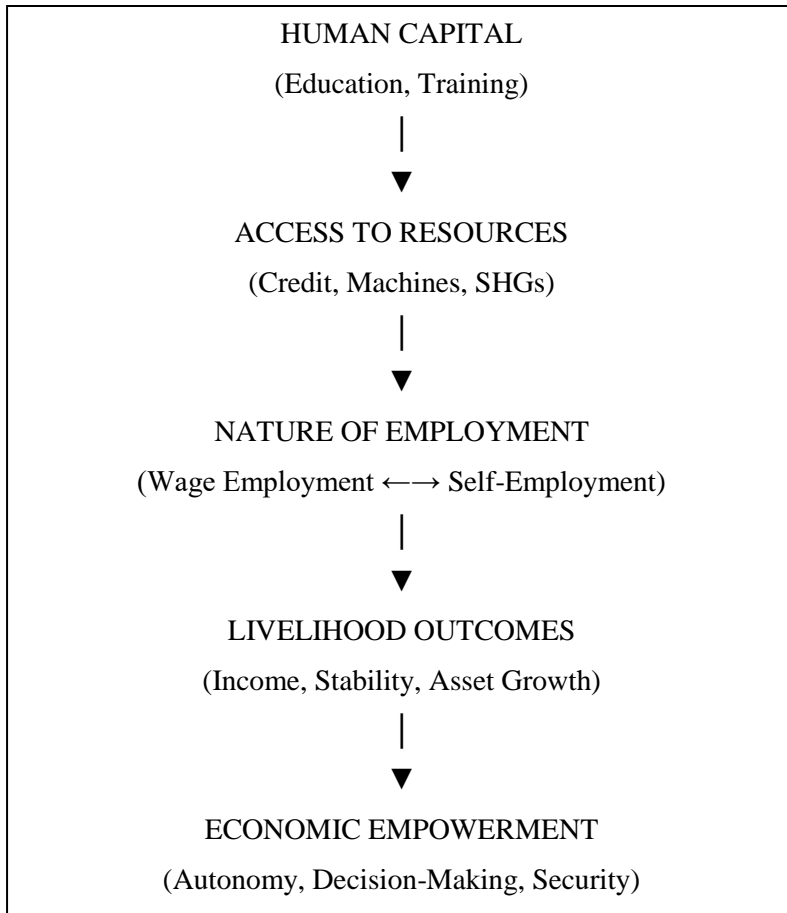


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

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## 175 **6. Results and Discussion**

176 The occupational distribution of respondents reveals a clear structural pattern within the tailoring  
177 sector in Wayanad district. A substantial majority of women (79%) are engaged in wage  
178 employment, while only 21% operate as self-employed entrepreneurs. Among the self-employed,  
179 most run small-scale tailoring shops, with only a marginal proportion engaged in home-based  
180 production. This distribution highlights a critical feature of the informal tailoring sector: while  
181 entry into wage employment is relatively easy, the transition to self-employment remains limited.  
182 From a livelihood perspective, this suggests that tailoring offers high accessibility but low upward  
183 mobility, a characteristic typical of many informal sector occupations.

184 The dominance of wage employment also implies restricted autonomy. Wage-employed women  
185 have limited control over pricing, working conditions, and income generation, which constrains  
186 their ability to achieve meaningful economic empowerment. In contrast, self-employed women,  
187 though fewer in number, exhibit greater independence and control over their work. The analysis of  
188 working hours indicates that the majority of respondents (64%) work between 6 to 8 hours per  
189 day, suggesting a moderate level of employment stability. However, a significant proportion  
190 (30%) work more than 8 hours daily, reflecting either higher demand for tailoring services or  
191 economic compulsion to maximize earnings.

192 From an empowerment perspective, long working hours do not necessarily translate into  
193 improved well-being. Instead, they may indicate income insufficiency, compelling women to  
194 extend working hours to meet household needs. This aligns with the argument in the literature  
195 that informal sector employment often leads to labour intensification without proportional income  
196 gains. The income analysis reveals a clear distinction between self-employed and wage-employed  
197 women. Self-employed respondents demonstrate higher average income levels compared to their  
198 wage-employed counterparts. However, income variability is significantly higher among self-  
199 employed women, reflecting fluctuations in demand, customer base, and seasonal factors.

200 A critical finding is that 71% of respondents belong to Below Poverty Line (BPL) households,  
201 indicating that tailoring primarily serves as a livelihood option for economically vulnerable  
202 groups. Wage-employed women are predominantly concentrated in lower income brackets, while  
203 self-employed women are more represented in higher income categories.

204 This suggests that tailoring contributes to income generation but has limited capacity to lift  
205 households out of poverty, especially in the absence of entrepreneurial expansion. Thus, tailoring  
206 functions more as a coping mechanism rather than a transformative economic activity.

207 Asset ownership patterns provide important insights into the economic positioning of women  
208 tailors. While a large proportion of respondents possess traditional assets such as gold (91%),  
209 land (76%), and residential property (70%), ownership of productive assets such as tailoring  
210 machines and shops is unevenly distributed.

211 All self-employed women own sewing machines, compared to only a small proportion of wage-  
212 employed women. Similarly, ownership of shops is exclusive to self-employed respondents. This  
213 highlights the central role of productive assets in enabling entrepreneurship and income  
214 enhancement.

215 The low level of financial assets, such as bank deposits, indicates limited financial inclusion and  
216 savings behavior. This restricts women's ability to invest in business expansion and increases  
217 dependence on informal or semi-formal credit sources.

218 Access to credit emerges as a critical factor influencing livelihood outcomes. The study finds that  
219 62% of respondents rely on Kudumbashree loans, making it the most significant source of  
220 financial support. Bank loans are used by 38% of respondents, while private institutional loans  
221 remain relatively limited.

222 Kudumbashree functions not only as a financial institution but also as a platform for social and  
223 economic support. However, the reliance on microcredit raises important concerns. While it  
224 facilitates access to capital, it does not necessarily ensure sustainable income growth or enterprise  
225 development. From an economic standpoint, this indicates that credit access alone is insufficient;  
226 it must be complemented by market access, skill enhancement, and asset creation to generate  
227 meaningful empowerment outcomes.

228 The relationship between education and employment type reveals a positive trend. Higher  
229 educational attainment is associated with a greater likelihood of self-employment. This is  
230 supported by the observed correlation between education and entrepreneurial activity. However,

231 the overall level of higher education among respondents remains low, with most women having  
 232 only basic or secondary education. This limits their capacity to diversify skills, adopt advanced  
 233 techniques, or expand into higher-value market segments. Similarly, while formal training  
 234 improves technical skills, it does not guarantee economic success. A significant proportion of  
 235 trained individuals remain in wage employment, indicating that skills alone are insufficient  
 236 without complementary resources such as capital and market access.

237 The regression analysis provides deeper insights into the factors influencing income among  
 238 women tailors. The results indicate that asset ownership and employment type are the most  
 239 significant determinants of income.

240 **Table 3 Regression results**

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

241 *Source: Author calculation using Primary Data*

242  $R^2 = 0.62$

243 Adjusted  $R^2 = 0.59$

244 F-statistic = 18.45

245 Sample Size (N) = 100

246 Notes:

247 \*\*\* Significant at 1% level

248 \*\* Significant at 5% level

249 \* Significant at 10% level

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251 Self-employed women earn significantly higher incomes compared to wage-employed workers,  
 252 confirming that entrepreneurship offers better economic returns. Similarly, ownership of  
 253 productive assets such as sewing machines and shops has a strong positive effect on income  
 254 levels. While education and training also show positive relationships with income, their effects are  
 255 relatively modest. This suggests that structural factors—particularly access to capital and assets—

256 play a more decisive role than individual capabilities. These findings reinforce the argument that  
257 the key barrier to empowerment is not lack of skill, but lack of economic opportunity structures.

258 The analysis of motivational factors reveals that 69% of respondents entered tailoring due to  
259 personal interest or passion, while financial necessity is a major driver among self-employed  
260 women. This dual motivation reflects the interplay between aspiration and compulsion. For many  
261 women, tailoring represents a socially acceptable occupation that aligns with traditional gender  
262 roles. At the same time, it provides a necessary source of income in the absence of alternative  
263 employment opportunities. The relatively low influence of hereditary factors suggests that  
264 tailoring is not strictly a traditional occupation but rather a modern livelihood adaptation.

265 The overall findings indicate that tailoring occupies an intermediate position between livelihood  
266 support and economic empowerment. It provides accessible income opportunities, especially for  
267 low-income households. It enhances skills and confidence. However, it offers limited upward  
268 mobility due to structural constraints. Thus, tailoring in Wayanad can be characterized as a  
269 “subsistence-plus” livelihood—one that goes beyond survival but falls short of enabling full  
270 economic independence. This aligns with critical literature, which cautions that informal sector  
271 activities framed as entrepreneurship may mask underlying precarity. Without structural  
272 interventions, tailoring risks remaining a low-income, low-growth occupation.

273 The analytical framework indicates that income variation among women tailors is not solely  
274 determined by skill levels but is significantly influenced by structural factors such as asset  
275 ownership and access to credit. The regression specification suggests that self-employment,  
276 supported by ownership of productive assets, yields higher returns compared to wage  
277 employment. However, limited access to capital restricts the ability of most women to transition  
278 into entrepreneurial roles. This reinforces the argument that tailoring, in its current institutional  
279 context, functions more as a subsistence activity rather than a pathway to sustained economic  
280 empowerment.

## 281 **7. Conclusion**

282 This study demonstrates that tailoring plays a significant role in supporting the livelihoods of  
283 women in Wayanad district. It provides an accessible entry point into income-generating work,  
284 particularly for women from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

285 However, the current structure of the tailoring sector limits its transformative potential. The  
286 dominance of wage employment, low levels of asset ownership, and restricted access to markets  
287 prevent women from achieving full economic empowerment.

288 For tailoring to evolve into a sustainable and empowering livelihood, policy interventions must  
289 focus on enterprise development rather than mere income support. Strengthening access to  
290 capital, skills, and markets can enable women to transition from wage labourers to entrepreneurs,  
291 thereby enhancing their economic independence and social status.

292 The study demonstrates that tailoring plays a significant role in supporting the livelihoods of  
293 women in Wayanad district. However, its potential as a pathway to economic empowerment

294 remains constrained by structural limitations. While it provides income and skill development  
295 opportunities, the dominance of wage employment and limited asset ownership restrict upward  
296 mobility. Transforming tailoring into a sustainable and empowering livelihood requires targeted  
297 interventions focusing on enterprise development, financial inclusion, and market integration.  
298 Strengthening these dimensions can enable women to transition from subsistence-level work to  
299 meaningful economic independence.

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