

ROLE OF WOMEN IN PARTICIPATORY FOREST MANAGEMENT: INSIGHTS FROM VANASAMRAKSHANA SAMITHI MEMBERS IN PONMUDI ECOTOURISM

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Abstract

Participatory Forest Management (PFM) in Kerala aims to conserve biodiversity while enhancing the livelihoods of forest-dependent communities. However, women's contributions to these efforts often go unrecognised. This study examines the involvement of women in Vana Samrakshana Samithies (VSSs) within Ponmudi's natural sanctuary through in-depth interviews and qualitative analysis. It explores their roles, perceptions, and the socioeconomic impacts of their participation. Despite their commitment to environmental conservation, women face challenges such as inadequate facilities and financial constraints. The study highlights these barriers and proposes solutions to improve basic amenities, healthcare access, fair compensation, and inclusive decision-making. By acknowledging women as key drivers of change, it advocates for their empowerment within forest-dependent communities. Strengthening gender equality in forest management can enhance both community well-being and environmental sustainability. Coordinated efforts are essential to foster long-term ecological and social resilience, ensuring that women receive due recognition and support in conservation initiatives.

Keywords:- Participatory Forest Management, Women's Roles, Challenges in Participation, Socioeconomic Impacts, Ponmudi Ecotourism.

Participatory Forest Management (PFM) has been a cornerstone strategy in Kerala since 1998, aimed at conserving biodiversity and uplifting the livelihoods of forest-dependent communities.

This approach fosters collaborative efforts through grassroots partnership institutions, such as Vana Samrakshana Samithies (VSSs) and Eco-Development Committees (EDCs).

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As of 2020–21, Kerala had boasted 427 VSSs and 213 EDCs, reflecting the extensive adoption and implementation of PFM initiatives (Kerala forest statistics, 2021). Despite this progress, the pivotal role of women in these endeavours is often unrecognized. This study focuses on women intimately involved with VSSs, particularly within the context of

Ponmudi’s natural sanctuary. It seeks to uncover the complexities of their roles, perceptions, and socio-economic impacts. By amplifying their voices, this study aims to advocate for their empowerment within forest-dependent communities, highlighting their invaluable contributions to participatory forest management frameworks.

Vanasamrakshana Samithi (VSS)			Eco Development Committees (EDC)		
Sl. No	Territorial Divisions	No. of VSS	Sl. No	Wildlife Divisions	No. of EDCs
1	Thiruvananthapuram	21	1	Parambikulam	7
2	Thenmala	11	2	Aralam	3
3	Punalur	17	3	Silent Valley	8
4	Konni	23	4	Wayanad WL	18
5	Ranni	34	5	Peechi	12
6	Achancoil	6	6	Thiruvananthapuram	33
7	Kottayam	14	7	Shenduruney	10
8	Kothamangalam	11	8	Idukki	9
9	Munnar	11	9	Munnar WL	27
10	Marayoor	25	10	Periyar East	46
11	Mankulam	10	11	Periyar West	40
12	Malayattoor	18			
13	Vazhachal	11			
14	Chalakkudy	13			
15	Thrissur	22			
16	Palakkad	13			
17	Mannarkad	17			
18	Nilambur South	15			
19	Nilambur North	31			
20	Nenmara	17			
21	North Wayanad	17			
22	South Wayanad	19			
23	Kozhikode	17			
24	Kannur	20			
25	Kasargod	14			
Total		427	Total		213

Source: Kerala Forest Statistics, 2022-23

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II. Review of Literature

Recent literature underscores the critical yet often overlooked role of women in Participatory Forest Management (PFM) in India. Studies reveal that, despite women's significant dependence on forests for household needs, their involvement in decision-making processes remains minimal. For instance, research in Haryana indicates that approximately 87 per cent of women did not attend Joint Forest Management (JFM) meetings, and only 7 per cent participated in discussions, highlighting substantial barriers to their engagement. Similarly, studies from community forest governance in India demonstrate that exclusionary practices hinder women's participation, leading to asymmetries in information sharing and challenges in rule enforcement. Conversely, initiatives like the women's self-help groups in Kerala's Periyar Tiger Reserve showcase the positive impact of active female involvement, where women have organised voluntary patrols to manage and protect forest resources effectively. These findings suggest that empowering women through inclusive policies and capacity-building programmes is essential for sustainable forest management and biodiversity conservation.

III. Statement of the Problem

The existing literature on PFM has largely overlooked the gender dimension, with studies primarily focusing on protection, rehabilitation, and ecological impacts. In the Kerala context, research has centred on implementation, social

capital building, forest policies, and demographic profiles, leaving significant gaps in understanding the socioeconomic impact on women in forest-adjacent communities. This study aims to address these gaps in the literature by evaluating the socioeconomic impact of PFM on women's empowerment within adjacent forest communities in the Ponmudi ecotourism area.

IV. Scope of the Study

This study utilized both primary and secondary data and employed a qualitative approach to understand the intricacies of women's perspectives. Secondary data were collected from various reports, articles, and publications. Conducted within the Ponmudi Ecotourism Region, this study provided an immersive understanding of the natural and cultural contexts surrounding the participants. An open and cooperative environment was fostered during participant engagement, encouraging candid responses while ensuring cultural sensitivity and respect for diverse perspectives.

V. Significance of the Study

This study highlights the vital role of women in Participatory Forest Management (PFM) at Ponmudi Ecotourism. It sheds light on their contributions, challenges, and the need for better facilities, fair wages, and decision-making opportunities. By recognising women as key agents of change, the study promotes gender equality, sustainable forest management, and community well-being, ensuring long-term ecological and economic benefits for future generations.

VI. Objectives of the Study

1. To examine women's role in forest management and decision-making in the VSS of Ponmudi Ecotourism.
2. To evaluate the perceptions of women on Participatory Forest Management (PFM) in Ponmudi Ecotourism.
3. To evaluate the socio-economic implications of PFM on women in the local communities of Ponmudi Ecotourism.
4. To identify the factors affecting the participation of women in PFM in Ponmudi Ecotourism.

VII. Methodology

Convenience sampling was used to select a representative sample of 20 women from the 75 actively involved in forest management activities, ensuring detailed insights. In-depth interviews served as the primary method of data collection and were meticulously designed to explore roles, socio-economic implications, participation factors, and perspectives related to participatory forest management. Informed consent was obtained from participants to maintain confidentiality and anonymity. Qualitative data were coded using the Atlas.ti software to facilitate organized analysis and identify emerging themes.

1. The role of women in participatory forest management

Women play a pivotal role in participatory forest management, especially in eco-tourism at the Vanasamrakshana Samithi in Ponmudi. Engaged in tasks like waste collection, visitor guidance, and business

management roles such as vice president, sales, billing, accounting, and cafeteria workers, they contribute significantly to biodiversity preservation and community well-being.

Women in maintaining a healthy ecotourism environment: Women at Ponmudi Ecotourism serve as knowledgeable guides, ensuring visitor compliance with environmental regulations while highlighting the area's natural beauty. They actively collect and dispose of waste, preserving cleanliness and biodiversity. Additionally, they manage parking areas, enforce regulations, and maintain peaceful surroundings. As cleaning staff, they uphold hygiene standards, enhancing the visitor experience and promoting eco-tourism's positive image.

Women in ecotourism business management: Women at Ponmudi Ecotourism exhibit competence and dedication as billing staff in the cafeteria, efficiently managing transactions even during peak seasons. Despite challenges, they strive for customer satisfaction. Additionally, as chefs and waiters, they ensure efficient food service, enhancing the guest experience. Employed as sales agents in the eco shop, they promote eco-friendly products and sustainable practices, contributing to environmental conservation and community livelihoods. An accountant meticulously records transactions, ensuring financial transparency. The vice president guides and inspires others, fostering community engagement in environmental initiatives. These women exemplify empowerment and leadership in ecotourism.

2. Perceptions of Women in Vanasamrakshana Samithi on Participatory Forest Management (PFM)

a) Perceptions of Women about Eco-Tourism

Women in Vanasamrakshana Samithi hold diverse views on eco-tourism and participatory forest management (PFM). Many see it as beneficial, creating jobs and improving livelihoods while ensuring biodiversity conservation through eco-friendly practices. A guide noted, *"Many poor people got jobs, and nature remains unharmed."* Improved transportation in Ponmudi has also benefitted residents and visitors.

Women's Views on Eco-Tourism

Facilities: While ecotourism has introduced basic amenities, challenges remain. Limited infrastructure, inadequate shelter, and umbrella shortages persist. Although water facilities are available, transportation support during overtime work is insufficient.

Concerns about Basic Facilities:

Women express dissatisfaction with inadequate washroom access, lack of dressing rooms, seating areas, and medical supplies. Menstrual hygiene challenges, overcrowded staff rooms, and insufficient shelter further highlight the need for better facilities.

Health and Emergency Rescue

Issues: Remote locations and a lack of medical supplies make access to healthcare difficult. Emergency transport is limited, with the nearest hospital 24 km away. Additionally, inadequate rescue equipment and poor communication infrastructure hinder emergency responses.

Barriers to Improvement: Women cite poor supervision, bureaucratic delays, and environmental concerns as major obstacles. Despite inspections, necessary improvements remain unaddressed, underscoring the need for proactive measures to enhance working conditions.

b) Opinions of Women about Officers

Women in Vanasamrakshana Samithi view officers positively, praising their fairness, professionalism, and lack of gender discrimination. Officers foster inclusivity and respect, enhancing cooperation and productivity. A guide stated, *"Officers are good, and there are no exploits."* Women see them as key to maintaining a supportive work environment.

c) Insights on Visitors

Women interact with diverse visitors, facing challenges such as rule violations and language barriers. Alcohol consumption and complaints about facilities are common concerns. To address issues, they facilitate structured feedback mechanisms. A parking worker noted, *"Some visitors resist rules, and I struggle with language outside Kerala and Tamil Nadu."*

d) Thoughts on VSS Meetings and Activities

Despite active participation, women hesitate to voice opinions due to fear of isolation or job loss. Unaddressed suggestions and lack of transparency reduce trust in the committee. Selective decision-making and the absence of a welfare fund add to concerns. Women call for more openness, inclusion, and accountability in VSS operations.

e) Perspectives on Their Jobs

Women rely on ecotourism jobs for financial stability but face poor working conditions and low pay. While they value emotional ties to their birthplace and visitor interactions, job satisfaction remains moderate. *Forty-five per cent hesitate to recommend the job to family.* Despite challenges, some encourage relatives to join due to sentimental attachments, highlighting the need for better conditions.

3) Socio-economic Implications of PFM for Women

Social Implications of PFM for Women: Participatory Forest Management (PFM) has profoundly impacted women in ecotourism, fostering dedication, skill development, and workplace security. Many have over ten years of experience, highlighting their commitment and competence. A safe work environment further enhances their motivation and well-being.

PFM has also elevated women's status and empowerment, offering financial independence and personal fulfilment. Their roles in ecotourism bring pride and contentment, making them community role models. This empowerment benefits not only the women but also regional development and natural resource conservation.

Economic Implications of PFM for Women: PFM impacts women's financial well-being, with modest monthly wages of ₹ 5000–₹ 7500, limiting savings and financial security. The absence of incentives or welfare measures from VSS adds to dissatisfaction. Despite peak-season revenues of ₹ 30 lakhs per month,

women receive only fixed wages, with no profit-sharing. Addressing income, savings, and incentives is essential for economic empowerment and stability in ecotourism.

4) Difficulties and Factors Affecting the Participation of Women

Personal Challenges: Women in PFM face financial stress due to low, irregular earnings, often resorting to borrowing. The absence of incentives like bonuses, insurance, or pensions worsens instability. Poor working conditions, long hours, and lack of medical leave force them to work while sick. Travel difficulties, inadequate shelters, and exposure to harsh weather add to their hardships.

Other Challenges: External obstacles include natural disasters, which halt operations, leaving women without work or compensation, unlike men. Gender discrimination limits alternative job opportunities. Occasional animal attacks further threaten safety, highlighting the need for better protective measures.

VIII. Findings

- Women play a key role in ecotourism, managing waste, guiding visitors, enforcing rules, and handling business operations.
- Inadequate infrastructure, including restrooms, dressing rooms, seating, and shelter, creates challenges, especially during peak seasons.
- Limited healthcare access, with the nearest hospital 24 km away, hampers medical assistance.

Table 1
Themes and Codes Identified.

Themes	Codes
Personal challenge	Climatic health issues, bus fare is taken from salary, for urgent needs, have to borrow, allotted room is converted to theatre, difficult for daily needs, doing job even sick, during rain, short circuit occurs, given room for staffs can afford only 4 persons, given salary is not enough according to the work, had one hut, it destroyed by wind, if complained, will get isolated, in raining, water enters in the given room, in raining, we stand in waste disposal place, lack of travelling facility from home, less salary, no advance, no allowances, no ATM facilities, no bonus, no facilities according to the entrance fee, no Gpay facility, no ID card is provided, sometimes visitors make issues, no insurances, no internet connection, no pension, no range to make calls, no travelling allowance, no travelling facility, old age workers may have to work 10 to 11 hours, overtime work in seasons, no additional payment given, rainy days difficult to eat food, salary is not in fixed date, salary may delay most of the time, sit and eat food in the hut for visitors, suffering to providing children
Other challenges	Sometimes, animals make disturbance, close down during natural calamities. Men will get job, ready to do more work, but not getting

Source: Primary data coded

- The lack of rescue equipment, communication infrastructure, and emergency response systems compromises safety.
- Women appreciate the professionalism and fairness of officers, noting an absence of gender discrimination.
- Managing visitor behaviour is challenging due to rule violations, alcohol consumption, disturbances, and language barriers.
- Low wages (₹ 5000–₹ 7500), with no bonuses or welfare benefits, hinder financial stability.
- Fear of job loss discourages active participation in VSS meetings, and women’s suggestions are often ignored.
- Financial independence is valued, but poor working conditions and low pay limit job satisfaction.
- Natural disasters disrupt women’s income, while men continue to receive job opportunities and financial support.
- Wildlife encounters, including animal attacks, pose safety risks.
- Employment enhances women’s empowerment, confidence, and social status.
- Despite high seasonal revenues, the absence of incentives, insurance, and pensions leaves women financially vulnerable.

- Poor transportation options make commuting, especially during overtime, difficult.
- Lack of transparency in VSS decision-making leads to dissatisfaction, as concerns remain unaddressed.

IX. Suggestions

- **Upgrade Infrastructure:** Modern and hygienic restrooms, clean dressing rooms, comfortable seating areas, and well-stocked medical supplies are essential. These basic amenities create a safe and respectful work environment for all, especially women.
- **Establish On-Site Emergency Medical Facilities:** Setting up first-aid centres and emergency medical rooms on-site ensures a quick response in case of injuries or health issues. This is vital in forest-based workplaces where hospitals may be far away.
- **Implement a Robust Rescue and Safety System:** An efficient safety system with clear communication tools, emergency drills, and rescue plans can save lives during accidents or natural disasters. Workers must be trained and ready for any situation.
- **Introduce Profit-Sharing or Incentive Programmes:** Sharing profits or offering performance-based incentives ensures fair financial rewards. It also motivates workers and acknowledges their valuable contributions.
- **Strengthen Language Training:** Providing language training helps women communicate better with

non-local tourists. This enhances visitor experience and boosts workers' confidence and professionalism.

- **Increase Salaries and Financial Benefits:** Better pay, along with bonuses, insurance, and pension plans, gives women financial stability. It also recognises their hard work and encourages long-term commitment.
- **Ensure Women's Active Participation in Decision-Making:** Women must be given a voice in Van Samrakshana Samithi (VSS) decisions. Their participation leads to more inclusive and effective planning.
- **Improve Transport Facilities:** Reliable and safe transport, especially during late hours or after overtime, is crucial. This prevents delays, ensures safety, and respects women's time and responsibilities.
- **Guarantee Job Security During Natural Disasters:** Natural calamities can affect work in forest areas, but women should not lose their jobs or income during such times. Job security builds trust and reduces stress.
- **Develop Wildlife Safety Training:** Workers need proper training to handle unexpected encounters with wild animals. This ensures their safety and builds confidence while working in forest areas.
- **Enhance Transparency in VSS Decision-Making:** Open and honest communication in decision-

making helps build trust. Workers should be informed and involved in policies and actions that affect them.

- **Strengthen Visitor Education on Ecotourism Rules:** Tourists should be made aware of ecotourism guidelines and local customs. This reduces misunderstandings and promotes respectful interactions between visitors and workers.
- **Assign Dedicated Supervisors for Worker Grievances:** A designated officer should be available to listen and act on workers' complaints. This ensures that issues are addressed quickly and fairly.
- **Advocate for Government and NGO Support:** Active collaboration with government bodies and NGOs can lead to better resources, policies, and opportunities

for women. Their involvement can bring lasting improvements in working conditions and economic empowerment.

X. Conclusions

This study highlights the vital role of women in participatory forest management in Ponmudi ecotourism, despite challenges like inadequate facilities, health issues, and financial constraints. While they appreciate ecotourism and fair leadership, concerns about job satisfaction and inclusion remain. Addressing these issues through better amenities, healthcare, fair pay, and inclusive decision-making is crucial. Recognising women as key contributors to conservation can drive sustainable forest management and gender equality. Focused interventions will empower women, protect ecosystems, and support the well-being of forest communities for future generations.

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