

Empowering Persons with Disabilities through Grassroots Organisations: A Case Study of Disabled People's Organisations in Kerala

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Abstract:

This study explores the role of Disabled People's Organizations (DPOs) in empowering Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) in Kerala, India, through grassroots initiatives. Drawing on insights from four Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) conducted in the districts of Trivandrum, Kozhikode, Idukki and Wayanad, the research examines the diverse interventions of DPOs. It highlights their significant contributions to promoting social inclusion, fostering economic independence and providing essential rehabilitation support for PWDs. Participants from these FGDs include leaders and members of DPOs, highlighting the diverse challenges faced by PWDs and the strategies adopted by DPOs to address them. The findings reveal that DPOs have been instrumental in promoting awareness of disability rights, advocating for accessible infrastructure and encouraging inclusive education. By fostering vocational skills, providing employment opportunities and facilitating micro-enterprises, these organisations have helped PWDs achieve economic self-reliance. Moreover, the study shows that the involvement of DPOs in health-related services, such as rehabilitation, medical support and the provision of assistive devices, has enhanced the quality of life for PWDs. The study underscores the importance of collective action through Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and federations in strengthening leadership and advocacy efforts. It also highlights the critical role of DPOs in advocating for policy reforms and engaging in rights-based activism to combat discrimination and social stigma. The DPOs' ability to network with local government bodies, NGOs and community organisations has further amplified their impact, ensuring sustained support for the PWD community. Further, the study examines the successes and challenges faced by DPOs, contributing to a deeper understanding of how grassroots organisations can act as powerful catalysts for empowering Persons with Disabilities (PWDs). The findings offer valuable insights into disability-inclusive development, providing lessons that are applicable not only in India but also globally.

Keywords: Disabled People's Organizations (DPOs), Persons with Disabilities (PWDs), Grassroots Empowerment, Social Inclusion, Economic Independence

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1. INTRODUCTION

Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) face numerous challenges in achieving social inclusion, economic independence and access to essential services, particularly in developing countries like India. According to the World Health Organization (2011), an estimated 15% of the global population lives with some form of disability, with a disproportionately high incidence in low- and middle-income countries. The 2011 Census reported over 2.68 crore PWDs in India, highlighting the urgent need for effective policies and interventions to address their specific needs (Government of India, 2011). Despite legislative frameworks, such as the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016), aimed at safeguarding the rights of PWDs, systemic barriers and social stigma often hinder their full participation in society (Nagar & Madan, 2020).

In the Indian context, particularly in Kerala, grassroots initiatives led by Disabled People's Organizations (DPOs) have emerged as pivotal in addressing these challenges. These organisations are critical in facilitating empowerment through community engagement and support, fostering social inclusion (Yadav & Rani, 2020). DPOs serve not only as advocates for the rights of PWDs but also as platforms for collective action, enabling individuals to voice their concerns and access essential services (Sharma, 2021).

This study investigates the multifaceted roles and contributions of DPOs in Kerala, focusing on four distinct districts: Thiruvananthapuram, Kozhikode, Idukki and Wayanad. Drawing insights from four Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with a diverse representation of PWDs, this research aims to illuminate the effectiveness of grassroots organisations in fostering empowerment and inclusion. By examining the various interventions employed by DPOs

ranging from awareness campaigns and vocational training to rehabilitation support and advocacy the study seeks to highlight the transformative impact of these organisations on the lives of PWDs.

Furthermore, this research explores the successes and challenges DPOs face, contributing to the broader discourse on disability-inclusive development in India. The findings aim to provide valuable lessons for stakeholders in the disability sector, emphasising the importance of grassroots initiatives in promoting the rights and dignity of PWDs. Ultimately, this study underscores the critical role that DPOs play in catalysing change, advocating for systemic improvements and enhancing the quality of life for PWDs in Kerala and beyond.

1.1 Research Questions

- How have Disabled People's Organizations (DPOs) contributed to the social, economic, and political empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) in the four districts studied?
- What role do DPOs play in leadership development and advocacy among PWDs and how does this impact the ability of PWDs to advocate for their rights and influence local policy changes?
- What are the primary challenges faced by DPOs in sustaining their initiatives, particularly concerning external funding and government support?
- How do DPOs address the unique challenges faced by women with disabilities (WWDs) and what specific barriers related to gender and disability continue to impede their participation in social and economic activities?
- What strategies have DPOs employed to promote the long-term sustainability of their programs and how effective have these strategies been in ensuring the continued empowerment of PWDs?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) has garnered increasing attention in the fields of social work, disability studies and public policy, particularly in the context of developing countries. The literature indicates that effective interventions at the grassroots level are essential for fostering social inclusion, economic independence and enhanced quality of life for PWDs. This literature review synthesises existing research on the role of Disabled People's Organizations (DPOs) in facilitating these objectives, with a specific focus on the Indian context.

The Role of DPOs in Empowering PWDs: Disabled People's Organizations have emerged as vital players in advocating for the rights and well-being of PWDs. According to Oliver (1990), DPOs contribute to the social model of disability by shifting the focus from individual impairments to societal barriers that inhibit participation. By engaging PWDs in collective action, DPOs empower individuals to challenge discrimination and advocate for their rights (De Jong, 2017). Research conducted by Padda and Bhatti (2018) highlights the transformative role of DPOs in promoting self-advocacy, leadership development and community engagement among PWDs in India.

Grassroots Initiatives and Social Inclusion: Grassroots organisations, particularly DPOs, are crucial in enhancing social inclusion for PWDs. According to Ghosh (2021), community-based initiatives led by DPOs have successfully raised awareness about disability rights and fostered inclusive practices in schools and workplaces. These initiatives not only improve the visibility of PWDs but also challenge prevailing stereotypes and stigma. For example, a study by Ranjan and Gupta (2020) found that awareness campaigns conducted by DPOs significantly increased the enrolment of disabled children in schools, thereby promoting their integration into the educational system.

Economic Independence and Vocational Training: The economic empowerment of PWDs is another significant focus area for DPOs. Research by Kamble and Vasant (2020) underscores the importance of vocational training programs offered by DPOs, which equip PWDs with skills necessary for gainful employment. The authors argue that these programs not only enhance the employability of PWDs but also foster their financial independence. A case study conducted in Kerala revealed that DPOs have successfully implemented various income-generating activities, enabling PWDs to establish micro-enterprises (Suresh & Kottarathil, 2022). However, challenges remain, such as limited access to financial resources and employment discrimination (Chakraborty & Kundu, 2019).

Rehabilitation and Support Services: Effective rehabilitation services are critical for enhancing the quality of life for PWDs. According to Singh and Mishra (2021), DPOs play a pivotal role in facilitating access to rehabilitation services, including medical treatments, assistive devices, and therapy. Their community-based approach allows for tailored support that meets the specific needs of individuals with disabilities. However, as noted by Kumar and Joshi (2020), systemic barriers, such as inadequate infrastructure and limited government support, often impede the effectiveness of these services.

Advocacy and Legal Frameworks: DPOs also engage in advocacy efforts to influence policy and legal frameworks affecting PWDs. Research by Bansal and Singh (2020) highlights the significance of DPOs in promoting the implementation of disability laws, such as the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016). These organisations serve as a bridge between PWDs and policymakers, ensuring that the voices of disabled individuals are heard in decision-making processes (Sharma & Rao, 2021). Despite these efforts, challenges persist in effectively enforcing existing laws, necessitating ongoing advocacy and community mobilisation.

3. METHODOLOGY

Research Design: This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the role of DPOs in empowering PWDs in Kerala, India. The qualitative approach allowed for an in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences, perceptions and insights regarding DPO interventions and initiatives. This approach allowed the researchers to understand how DPOs contribute to the social, economic and political empowerment of PWDs in Kerala.

Participants and Sampling Strategies

Sampling Method: A purposive sampling strategy was employed to recruit participants who were directly involved with or affected by DPO activities. Purposive sampling was deemed most appropriate as the study sought to gather in-depth perspectives from individuals with specific characteristics, namely PWDs engaged with DPOs or related disability initiatives. This method ensured the selection of participants with rich knowledge and experience relevant to the research questions.

Participants: The participants for this study were recruited from four districts in Kerala: Trivandrum, Kozhikode, Idukki, and Wayanad. Participants were selected with the assistance of local DPOs to ensure a diverse representation, encompassing various age groups, genders and types of disabilities. The inclusion criteria for participants were:

- Individuals aged 19 and above.
- Members of DPOs or associated with disability-related initiatives.
- Willingness to share their experiences and insights during the FGDs.

Sample Size Justification: A total of 84 participants took part in the study, representing a diverse range of PWDs, DPO leaders, and community members. This sample size was considered adequate for qualitative research, allowing for data saturation while providing varied and representative insights. Participants were distributed across four FGDs, with each discussion involving between 19 and 22 participants. The sampling aimed to ensure broad coverage across different disability types, genders, socio-economic backgrounds and age groups.

Data Collection: The primary data collection method was FGDs, conducted in four districts. The FGDs were designed using a semi-structured interview protocol to allow for flexibility in exploring participants' experiences while maintaining a clear focus on key areas of inquiry.

The following key topics were addressed during the FGDs:

- **Awareness and Advocacy Efforts:** How DPOs have raised awareness about disability rights and advocated for policy changes.
- **Economic Empowerment and Vocational Training:** The role of DPOs in promoting economic independence and offering vocational training programs for PWDs.
- **Social Inclusion and Community Participation:** Participants' views on the effectiveness of DPOs in promoting social inclusion and participation in community activities.
- **Rehabilitation and Healthcare Access:** The availability and effectiveness of rehabilitation and healthcare services for PWDs, facilitated by DPOs.
- **Challenges and Sustainability of DPO Initiatives:** Participants' insights into the challenges faced by DPOs, including funding, leadership and sustainability issues.

Structure and Conduct of FGDs: The FGDs were facilitated by trained moderators knowledgeable about disability issues and familiar with the local context. With participants' consent, the discussions were audio-recorded, and detailed notes were taken to capture non-verbal cues and interactions.

Data Analysis: The data collected from the FGDs were subjected to qualitative content analysis, following an inductive coding process. The analysis process involved the following steps:

- **Familiarization:** The research team transcribed the audio recordings verbatim and reviewed the transcripts and field notes to immerse themselves in the data.
- **Open Coding:** Initial coding was done manually to identify key ideas and patterns. Codes were assigned to sections of text that reflected important themes, such as economic empowerment, social inclusion, advocacy and healthcare access.
- **Focused Coding and Theme Development:** After the initial coding, similar codes were grouped into broader categories. Themes such as "challenges in accessing healthcare," "vocational training outcomes," and "DPO sustainability issues" were developed through this iterative process.
- **Inter-Coder Reliability:** To enhance the reliability of the analysis, multiple researchers coded the data. Regular meetings were held to compare codes and resolve any discrepancies, ensuring a high level of inter-coder reliability.
- **Thematic Analysis:** Themes were either derived inductively from the data or aligned with existing theoretical frameworks such as the social model of disability and intersectionality to explore the interplay between disability, gender and socio-economic factors.
- **Validation:** To ensure the credibility of the findings, member checking was conducted. A subset of participants reviewed the preliminary findings and provided feedback to confirm the accuracy of the interpretations.

Ethical Considerations: Given the involvement of a vulnerable population, this study followed stringent ethical guidelines:

- **Informed Consent:** Participants were provided with detailed information about the study and consented before participating. Consent was obtained in accessible formats, including verbal consent where necessary.
- **Confidentiality and Anonymity:** The identities of all participants were kept confidential. Pseudonyms were used to report findings and any identifying information was removed from the transcripts. All data were securely stored, with access restricted to the research team.
- **Ethical Approval:** Ethical guidelines were adhered to throughout the study, with attention to minimising harm and ensuring participant welfare.

4. MAJOR FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Enhanced Social Inclusion and Awareness

Disabled People's Organizations (DPOs) have played a pivotal role in promoting social inclusion and raising awareness about the rights of Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) across the four districts studied. Through sustained community education efforts, DPOs have significantly contributed to shifting societal attitudes toward PWDs. These interventions have fostered more inclusive environments, particularly in schools and public spaces, resulting in greater acceptance and participation of PWDs in mainstream society.

Respondents across all districts highlighted the transformative impact of DPO-led awareness programs. A participant from Thiruvananthapuram remarked: “Earlier, people in our village did not know much about disabilities and we faced a lot of discrimination. However, after the DPO organised awareness sessions, people started to understand our situation better. Now, my son can attend school and the teachers are more supportive than before.” Similarly, a female respondent from Kozhikode noted: “Before these awareness campaigns, my child was often teased in school. But now, the teachers and students are more understanding. The school even made some changes to make it easier for my daughter to move around.”

In Wayanad, a respondent shared the positive impact of cultural programs and street plays organised by DPOs in raising awareness: “The cultural programs and street plays conducted by the DPO helped everyone in the community understand that PWDs have equal rights. The change in attitude is visible. We are no longer looked down upon.” These narratives reflect the success of DPOs in creating inclusive environments, particularly in schools. Their sustained advocacy has led to an increase in the enrolment of children with disabilities in mainstream education. In Idukki, one parent stated: “The DPO motivated us to send our children to school. Now, my son is not only attending school but is also participating in extracurricular activities, something I never thought possible before.”

The findings underscore the critical role DPOs play in promoting social inclusion and raising awareness about disability rights. Grassroots interventions by DPOs have been effective in challenging societal barriers and shifting public perceptions, particularly in educational settings. These results align with the work of Ghosh (2021), who documented the success of community-based initiatives in fostering social inclusion for PWDs. By targeting schools and public spaces, DPOs have succeeded in creating environments where PWDs are no longer marginalised but actively included in daily activities.

Despite improvements in social inclusion and awareness, participants in the study still face lingering discrimination and a lack of infrastructure to fully support PWDs. While DPOs have made significant strides, continued efforts are needed to ensure these gains are sustained and expanded. Advocacy must move beyond awareness campaigns to address structural issues, such as inadequate public transportation and accessibility in rural areas. A respondent from Idukki expressed this concern: “The schools have become more supportive, but getting to the school is still a challenge due to poor transportation. We need more changes to help us participate fully.” This highlights the need for comprehensive policies that address not only social attitudes but also the infrastructural barriers limiting the mobility and participation of PWDs.

4.2. Economic Empowerment and Vocational Training

Across the four districts, DPOs have played a crucial role in facilitating economic empowerment through skill development programs, self-employment initiatives and access to micro-credit schemes. In districts like Wayanad, where agriculture is the primary source of livelihood, DPOs have promoted vocational training in agro-based activities,

food processing, tailoring and other trades, enabling PWDs to integrate into the local economy.

A recurring theme in the FGDs was the bureaucratic challenges that PWDs face in accessing government assistance. DPOs were seen as vital in bridging the gap between government programs and the actual needs of PWDs. A respondent from Wayanad remarked: “The government schemes are there, but they are hard to access. Without the help of the DPO, I wouldn’t have been able to apply for any financial assistance. They helped me fill out the paperwork and get the necessary documents.” In Kozhikode, a participant who benefited from a DPO-led vocational training program shared their experience: “I learned tailoring through the DPO’s training program and now I am earning a steady income. Before this, I had to depend entirely on my family, but now I contribute to household expenses.” In Idukki, another respondent discussed the importance of micro-credit schemes facilitated by DPOs: “We were trained in food processing and received a small loan through the DPO. With that, I was able to start a small business and now have a regular income.”

These findings emphasise the importance of vocational training and financial support in empowering PWDs economically, particularly in rural settings where employment opportunities are limited. The outcomes align with the work of Mitra et al. (2019), who emphasised that skill development is critical to the economic empowerment of PWDs. The vocational training and resources provided by DPOs have not only equipped PWDs with the necessary skills but have also instilled a sense of independence and self-worth.

However, despite these positive developments, ongoing challenges remain. Bureaucratic hurdles, such as complex application processes for government assistance, continue to impede access to financial support, as echoed in the findings of Mohapatra and Narayan (2021). Strengthening the linkages between DPOs, financial institutions and government bodies is essential to ensure that PWDs have consistent access to the capital needed to sustain their enterprises.

4.3. Strengthening of Self-Help Groups (SHGs)

DPOs have been instrumental in forming and strengthening SHGs, which serve as vital platforms for collective advocacy and economic activities. SHGs have promoted savings and credit schemes, leadership development and group entrepreneurship, fostering solidarity among PWDs in all four districts.

A respondent from Thiruvananthapuram highlighted how SHGs promoted savings and credit initiatives: “Before joining the SHG, I did not have any regular savings. Now, with the help of the group, we can pool our resources together, which helps in times of need. It is also easier to get small loans to start a business or deal with emergencies.” Similarly, in Kozhikode, another participant discussed how SHGs fostered leadership and decision-making skills: “I was hesitant at first, but being part of the SHG has helped me learn how to lead discussions and make decisions. Now, I can represent our group and speak to the local authorities about our needs.” Participants from Wayanad emphasised how SHGs empowered them to advocate for their rights: “Through the SHG, we have been able to come together and

approach the local government to demand better services for people with disabilities. Together, our voices are stronger.”

The findings reinforce the crucial role that SHGs play in fostering financial inclusion and collective advocacy among PWDs. SHGs not only provide economic benefits through savings and credit schemes but also empower PWDs by fostering solidarity and leadership skills. This is consistent with the findings of Gupta and Kumar (2019), who demonstrated that SHGs significantly improve the financial security and social cohesion of marginalised groups. However, the study also highlighted challenges related to the sustainability of SHGs and access to larger markets for group-based enterprises.

4.4. Rehabilitation and Healthcare Access

In remote districts like Idukki and Wayanad, access to rehabilitation services and healthcare remains a significant challenge for PWDs. DPOs have initiated home-based rehabilitation programs and organised medical camps, providing essential services and access to aids and appliances. However, the lack of government-supported rehabilitation services was a recurring concern, particularly for those requiring long-term medical care and assistive devices.

A respondent from Idukki highlighted the importance of home-based rehabilitation programs: “I could not travel to the city regularly for therapy, and my condition was getting worse. Thanks to the DPO, they arranged for a therapist to come to my home, and now I can do the exercises regularly.” In Wayanad, another participant emphasised the value of medical camps: “The medical camps are a lifeline for us. They not only provide us with check-ups but also give us access to devices like crutches and hearing aids. Without these camps, many of us would have no way of getting these services.”

The findings highlight a critical gap in long-term, government-supported rehabilitation services for PWDs in remote areas. Access to healthcare, especially rehabilitation, is fundamental to disability rights, as recognised by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (UN, 2006). While DPOs have initiated vital home-based rehabilitation programs and medical camps, the study indicates that these efforts alone cannot substitute for formal healthcare systems.

The findings underscore the need for greater government investment in long-term rehabilitation services and the provision of high-quality assistive devices. To ensure that PWDs in remote areas have access to sustainable healthcare services, policymakers must address the unique challenges faced by these communities.

4.5. Leadership Development and Advocacy

DPOs have significantly contributed to leadership development among PWDs across the four districts. Through structured training programs and the creation of federations at the Panchayat (local governance) level, PWDs have been empowered to engage in advocacy and participate actively in community development efforts. This capacity-building has enabled PWDs to raise their voices on issues such as discrimination, access to public services and property rights.

These efforts have led to successful advocacy for policy changes within their local communities.

The formation of Panchayat-level federations has been particularly impactful in districts like Kozhikode and Wayanad, where PWDs have organised collectively to address systemic challenges. During FGDs, participants expressed a sense of empowerment, attributing their confidence in leadership roles to the support provided by DPOs. One respondent from Kozhikode shared, “Before the DPO training, we did not know how to advocate for our rights. Now, we participate in Panchayat meetings and can speak on issues that affect us directly. We even managed to get ramps built in government buildings something that seemed impossible before.” Similarly, in Wayanad, another participant highlighted how leadership development had contributed to advocacy for land rights: “Through the Panchayat-level federation, we fought for our right to land, which is often denied to people with disabilities. After a long struggle, we succeeded in getting local authorities to include us in the property distribution program.”

Leadership development has had a ripple effect beyond individual empowerment, influencing societal perceptions of disability. Participants noted that being seen as leaders within their communities helped dismantle stereotypes and shift societal attitudes. A participant from Thiruvananthapuram observed, “People used to pity us, thinking we could not contribute to society. But now, they see us leading meetings and advocating for our rights, which has changed their perception. We are seen as equal members of the community.” However, participants also noted challenges, particularly in sustaining advocacy efforts without consistent governmental support. A respondent from Idukki shared, “We have successfully raised awareness about disability rights, but without regular support from local government officials, it is hard to maintain momentum. We need more backing from policymakers to make lasting changes.”

These findings underscore the pivotal role that DPOs have played in empowering PWDs to become advocates for their rights. Leadership development is crucial for empowerment, enabling marginalised groups to challenge systemic barriers and demand greater inclusion. Research supports the notion that leadership training for PWDs is essential for fostering self-advocacy and community engagement (Shakespeare et al., 2019). The formation of federations at the local governance level has provided PWDs with a platform to voice their concerns and advocate for policy changes. This aligns with studies suggesting that the decentralisation of governance structures can be an effective means of empowering marginalised groups (Kothari, 2017).

The shift in societal attitudes resulting from the visibility of PWDs in leadership roles is particularly significant. Leadership not only empowers individuals but also challenges prevailing stereotypes about disability. As noted by Grills et al. (2020), the visibility of PWDs in leadership positions can help combat stigma and promote a more inclusive society. However, the findings also highlight the challenges of sustaining advocacy initiatives without consistent governmental support. While DPOs have been successful in raising awareness and advocating for policy changes, stronger partnerships with local governments are needed to achieve long-term systemic change (Mitra, 2021).

4.6. Challenges in Sustainability

Despite the notable progress made by DPOs, challenges related to the sustainability of their initiatives emerged as a significant concern. Participants across all four districts emphasised the heavy reliance on external funding and the lack of consistent government support as major barriers to sustaining their work in the long term.

In Kozhikode, a respondent highlighted the financial instability faced by many DPOs: “We have done a lot of work with external funding, but when that funding stops, it becomes very difficult to continue the programs. We need more sustainable solutions, but becoming financially independent is not easy.” In Idukki, another participant remarked, “We cannot always rely on foreign or NGO funding. What happens if that support dries up? We need the government to step in more regularly.”

Many participants noted that while short-term government initiatives exist, long-term support from government programs is lacking. In Wayanad, a respondent expressed the need for more robust collaboration with local authorities: “We have achieved a lot, but without regular support from the government, how can we keep going? We cannot just depend on donations and grants forever.” In response to these challenges, some DPOs have begun strengthening their internal capacities. For example, several organisations have initiated savings and thrift management programs to promote financial independence among their members. A participant from Thiruvananthapuram explained, “We have started thrift and savings programs to create our funds, helping us depend less on external funding and manage small-scale initiatives on our own.”

These findings highlight a common issue for grassroots organisations: while DPOs are crucial in empowering PWDs and fostering social inclusion, their long-term viability often depends on external factors, such as funding and government support. The reliance on short-term, project-based funding makes DPOs vulnerable to fluctuations, as participants expressed concern about the potential cessation of donor support. This challenge is compounded by inconsistent government investment in DPO programs, particularly in rural areas where geographical isolation further limits access to resources and services.

Sustaining these initiatives will require stronger government partnerships to ensure that DPOs are not solely dependent on external, temporary funding. This aligns with broader global research, which highlights the need for long-term governmental investment in grassroots disability organisations to ensure the continuity of essential services such as advocacy, vocational training and rehabilitation (Banks & Hulme, 2012).

4.7. Impact on Women with Disabilities

Women with Disabilities (WWDs) face unique challenges compounded by both gender and disability-related discrimination. Although WWDs were a minority in the FGDs across the four districts, their participation in DPO activities has been growing steadily. However, participants reported that WWDs continue to experience greater social

isolation and fewer economic opportunities compared to their male counterparts, indicating the need for more targeted, gender-sensitive initiatives within DPOs.

A respondent from Kozhikode described the double burden of exclusion: “As a woman, it is much harder to find opportunities, even harder than it is for men with disabilities. I do not feel safe going out alone, and finding work is almost impossible.” Another participant from Wayanad highlighted the lack of vocational training programs specifically tailored to women: “Most of the training programs are focused on men, like carpentry or mechanics. But for women like me, there are fewer opportunities. We need more training in areas like tailoring or small-scale businesses.”

Social norms also play a role in limiting the participation of WWDs in community activities. A woman from Thiruvananthapuram noted, “Even within our families, women with disabilities are often overprotected. People do not allow us to participate in community activities as much as they would allow men, thinking it is not safe for us.” Despite these challenges, there is optimism that DPOs are beginning to address gender-specific barriers. A participant from Idukki observed a gradual shift: “Things are changing slowly. We now have more women’s groups within our DPO, and they are starting to address issues like sexual harassment and domestic violence.”

These findings highlight the critical gaps in gender equity within disability advocacy. While WWDs have historically been underrepresented in grassroots disability movements, their participation is increasing, albeit with significant barriers still in place. Global research has shown that WWDs are often “doubly disadvantaged” due to their intersecting identities (Mitra et al., 2019). Gender-based discrimination and societal expectations around femininity and disability exacerbate the social isolation and economic exclusion of WWDs (Groce & Kett, 2013).

The findings suggest that social isolation is a significant issue for WWDs, driven by deep-rooted patriarchal norms. Studies on gender and disability in South Asia have consistently highlighted how cultural norms reinforce the perception of WWDs as more vulnerable or in need of protection, further marginalising them from community life (Chaudhry, 2018). However, the FGDs indicate that DPOs are beginning to address these challenges by creating women’s groups and integrating more gender-sensitive programming, as seen in Idukki’s efforts to tackle issues such as sexual harassment and domestic violence. More comprehensive gender-sensitive policies and partnerships with local women’s organisations are needed to ensure that WWDs are not only included in DPO activities but also empowered to challenge both gender and disability-based discrimination.

5. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the critical role that Disabled People’s Organizations (DPOs) play in empowering Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) across four districts. DPOs have significantly contributed to the social, economic and political inclusion of PWDs through a wide range of initiatives, including vocational training, advocacy and leadership development. These efforts have led to tangible improvements in the quality of life for PWDs, enabling them

to challenge systemic discrimination and access opportunities previously out of reach.

The formation of Panchayat-level federations has been particularly impactful in fostering leadership and advocacy skills among PWDs. These federations have provided PWDs with platforms to engage in local governance, advocate for their rights and push for policy changes, particularly in areas such as accessibility and property rights. The findings indicate that the increased visibility of PWDs in leadership roles has contributed to a shift in societal attitudes, reducing stigma and promoting greater inclusion. However, these achievements are often tempered by the challenges of sustaining advocacy efforts without consistent governmental support.

Sustainability remains a significant concern for DPOs, as they rely heavily on external funding sources, often short-term and project-based. While some organisations have initiated efforts to become financially independent, the lack of long-term government investment limits their ability to maintain and expand their programs. The inconsistent implementation of disability policies, particularly at the local level, exacerbates this issue, highlighting the need for stronger partnerships between DPOs and government institutions.

The study also underscores the unique challenges faced by women with disabilities (WWDs), who continue to experience social isolation, limited economic opportunities and gender-based discrimination. Although DPOs have made progress in addressing these issues by creating women's groups and integrating gender-sensitive programming, much work remains to be done. There is a pressing need for more targeted interventions that address the intersection of gender and disability, particularly in rural areas where patriarchal norms and overprotection further marginalise WWDs.

Overall, while DPOs have made significant strides in empowering PWDs and fostering greater social inclusion, their sustainability remains precarious. Strengthening government support, securing more stable funding mechanisms and addressing the unique challenges WWDs face will ensure the long-term success of DPOs and their ability to continue driving positive change for PWDs.

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