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³Research Scholar, DTHM, Mizoram University, Aizwal**Abstract**

The current qualitative research paper analyses how sustainable tourism development in Odisha, India, leads to empowerment of women as central actors and not just passive beneficiaries. Though there is talk about gender inclusion in tourism policy discourse, there is a dearth of information regarding the processes and mechanisms that lead to women empowerment through tourism, specifically in the context of rural areas in eastern India. The current study adopts a constructivist and interpretivist perspective in undertaking a multi-case qualitative study using a sample of three different rural tourism destinations in Odisha: Raghurajpur (heritage craft village), Mangalajodi (wetland-based ecotourism destination), and Nuapatna (handloom tourism hub). Methods used to collect data included narrative interviews of 52 women tourism micro-enterprises (46 in depth), six men family members/tourism officials, 14 focus group discussions of 8–10 people each, participant observations (120 hours), and document analysis of tourism policies/SHG documentation. The analysis, informed by the six phases proposed by Braun & Clarke, identified three linked pathways of women's empowerment which include: (1) **Economic Pathway** :- movement from unpaid domestic work to tourism-based wage employment and property rights; (2) **Social Pathway** :- changing household decision making and community leadership role, breaking through patriarchal values; and (3) **Psychological Pathway** :- development of self-efficacy and visibility in public space as well as aspiration. However, several factors such as seasonality and related uncertainties, mobility restrictions owing to the purdah system, lack of ownership rights to land and insufficient tourism facilities pose barriers for sustainable empowerment. The paper advances a novel theoretical framework for understanding the process of women's empowerment through tourism known as "**Women at the Core Empowerment Pathways Framework**" (WAC-EPF), blending feminist political ecology and sustainable livelihoods perspectives. Recommendations based on the findings involve compulsory joint ownership of land titles in the tourism enterprises, addressing seasonality issues, and auditing tourism infrastructure with a gender perspective.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Sustainable Rural Tourism, community Based Tourism, feminist political ecology, empowerment pathways**1. Introduction****1.1 Background and Rationale**

The concept of sustainable rural tourism has gained traction as a development strategy in the Global South, providing prospects for poverty alleviation, cultural preservation, and environmental sustainability (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018). Odisha is an eastern Indian state with extensive multidimensional poverty (30.5% of the population, NITI Aayog, 2023), abundant indigenous culture, and fragile ecologies including the Eastern Ghats and Chilika Lake, where rural tourism has been vigorously encouraged since the Odisha Tourism Policy of 2016. However, tourism development has always used a gender-neutral strategy, implying that economic gains would inevitably flow to women (Ferguson & Alarcón, 2015). The author argues on how women who are *structurally and ideologically* excluded not by capacity or interest, but precisely because the community's pursuit of upward social mobility (via Sanskritisation) intensifies patriarchal surveillance. (Das, 2024)

Women's participation plays a significant role in the development of tourism, especially rural tourism. The role of women in non-compensable in rural tourism development. In spite of their crucial contribution in rural tourism development, women encounter several obstacles and limits that hinder them from fully engaging in local tourism operations.

Concurrently, discourse around sustainable tourism now understands that the empowerment of women is no mere addition but a necessity for long-term sustainability on ecological and cultural grounds. The women of rural Odisha are the users of common pool resources like water, fuel wood, and forest products as well as keepers of indigenous knowledge concerning crafts, cuisine, and biodiversity. Women excluded from tourism decision making results in cultural commoditization, environmental destruction, and social conflicts (Boley et al., 2014)

With this contradiction between the possibilities of women playing a key role in the process versus their actual exclusion from it, the study focuses on the following question: Which routes support and/or impede women's empowerment through the development of sustainable rural tourism in Odisha?

1.2 Aim & Objectives of the study

Aim: To examine the process of empowerment of women in relation to the development of sustainable rural tourism in Odisha using a qualitative approach, and to establish an empirically based empowerment pathways framework.

Objectives:

1. To uncover the economic, social, and psychological routes through which rural women in Odisha gain empowerment from participating in tourism.
2. To determine the barriers hindering empowerment.
3. To understand the ways in which women challenge patriarchy through tourism spaces.
4. To formulate the Women at the Core Empowerment Pathways Framework (WAC-EPF).

1.3 Significance of the Study

The current research addresses three main gaps in prior literature. First, most existing works on tourism empowerment are concerned primarily with the Latin American region (such as Mexico, Costa Rica), while the empirical literature from the socio-ecological setting of eastern India is lacking (as highlighted by Das & Pati, 2022). Second, studies employing an emic approach to gather insider perspectives through qualitative methods are underrepresented in favour of empowerment indexes based on quantitative data. Third, no study to date has compared three different types of rural tourism in the same Indian state.

2. Literature Review**2.1 Theoretical Foundations: Feminist Political Ecology and Empowerment**

The present work draws upon two interlinked theoretical foundations: **feminist political ecology (FPE)** and **Kabeer's empowerment framework**.

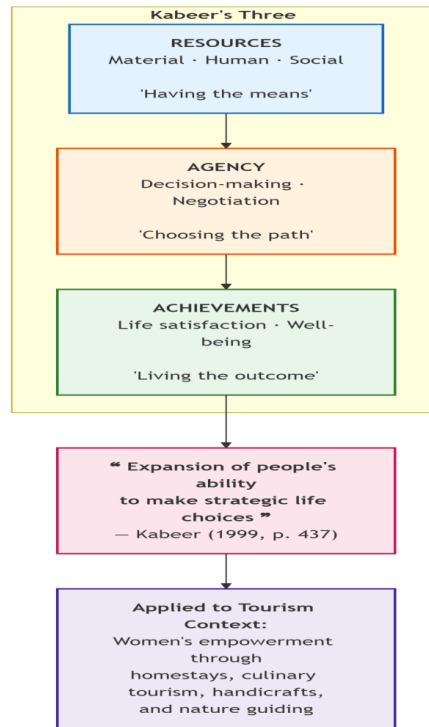
Feminist political ecology (Elmhirst, 2011) analyses the relationship between gender, power relations, and access to environment. In rural Odisha, women engage in constant interaction with the forest, the wetland, and agriculture that results in knowledge and labour. If these relationships are overlooked by interventionists implementing a new form of tourism, they may result in both environmental destruction (for example, overexploitation of crafts material) and exclusion of those left without the benefit of tourism (for instance, if men capture the profits from women-controlled natural resources). According to FPE, sustainable tourism should acknowledge women's agency in dealing with and knowing about the environment, rather than using their traditional role as cultural symbols.

According to (Kabeer, n.d., 1999), empowerment can be defined as "the expansion of people's ability to make strategic life choices" (p. 437); these can be considered in terms of three dimensions of empowerment:

- **Resources** (material, human, and social);
- **Agency** (decision-making process, negotiation, etc.);
- **Achievements** (life satisfaction).

The present research uses Kabeer's framework applied to tourism-related circumstances.

Figure :1 Feminist political ecology (FPE) and Kabeer’s empowerment framework.



(Source: Author’s own compilation)

2.2 Women in Rural Tourism: From Marginalization to Transformation

On a global scale, women make up 54% of the tourism industry’s employees yet comprise only 23% of management positions and 15% of the boards of tourism companies (“Global Report on Women in Tourism – Second Edition, Key Findings,” 2019). The position of women in rural India is even worse: their employment rate is 24% (World Bank, 2023), and the involvement in tourism tends to perpetuate traditional gender roles. Women cook for homestays, clean guests' rooms, and manufacture souvenirs, thus extending their unpaid care work.(Program et al., 2025)

Nevertheless, transformation is possible. Models of community-based tourism (CBT) in the backwaters of Kerala (R et al., 2017)and eco-tourism in Sikkim (Chhetri & Tamang, 2019)reveal that female participation in designing tourism products such as homestay guidelines, nature walks, and pricing craft goods leads to women acquiring bargaining power in their families and villages. Empowerment does not happen spontaneously: it presupposes organizational support in the form of all-female self-help groups (SHGs), obligatory representation in tourism management, advanced training, and microfinance.

Table 1: Women in Rural Tourism – From Marginalization to Transformation

Dimension	Global Context	Rural Indian Context	Pathways to Transformation (CBT Models)
Employment Share	Women make up 54% of tourism industry employees (UNWTO, 2019)	Women's employment rate in rural India is only 24% (World Bank, 2023)	Increase women's participation in tourism product design
Leadership Gap	Only 23% of management positions held by women	Even lower representation in rural tourism leadership	Mandatory representation in tourism management committees
Board Representation	Only 15% of tourism company boards are women	Largely absent in rural destination governance	All-female Self-Help Groups (SHGs) as decision-making bodies
Nature of Work	(Implied formal employment)	Traditional gender roles perpetuated: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cooking for homestays • Cleaning guests' rooms • Manufacturing souvenirs → <i>Extension of unpaid care work</i> (George & Padda, 2021)	Shift from unpaid to recognized economic contributions
Empowerment Mechanisms	Not specified	Largely absent without structured support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advanced training programs • Microfinance access • Organizational support from SHGs
Evidence of Transformation	Structural barriers remain	Limited evidence of spontaneous empowerment	Successful CBT models: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kerala backwaters: Women designing homestay guidelines, nature walks, pricing craft goods (Andiani et al., 2025; Jensmon et al., 2025; Mohanan et al., 2026a, 2026b) • Sikkim eco-tourism: Women acquiring bargaining power in families and villages (Chhetri & Tamang, 2019)

Source: Author’s own compilation based on existing data

2.3 Empowerment Pathways: From Idea to Practice

Theories have posited various pathways. Economic pathway pertains to earning money, asset building, and financial independence (Ashley, 2005). Social pathway entails lower levels of domestic violence, greater education expenditure on girls, and involvement in communal governance (Keleher & Franklin, 2008). Psychological pathway relates to self-respect, external self-confidence, and upward mobility (Scheyvens, 2002).

Pathways are not necessarily linear but dialectic; psychological benefits facilitate economic risks, which provide resources for social ascension. Nonetheless, empirical literature assumes pathways to be universal rather than local. The specificities of Odisha, such as the high tribal proportion (22.8%), matrifocal culture among some indigenous populations (such as the Saora tribe), and substantial governmental SHG networks (Mission Shakti), necessitate localization.

2.4 Research Gaps and Contributions

After synthesizing the literature review, three gaps can be identified:

1. **Gap in Geography:** There is no research that investigates women's empowerment through tourism from an experiential perspective in Odisha.
2. **Gap in Methodology:** The dominant approach to studying the topic is quantitative surveys, which miss out on the complex stories of women's lives.
3. **Gap in Pathways:** Earlier studies have taken for granted that there is a clear and direct pathway between tourism and women's empowerment.

Table:-2 Three-Gap Table with Contributions

Gap Type	Identified Gap	Contribution of the Present Study
Gap in Geography	No research investigates women's empowerment through tourism from an experiential perspective in Odisha	Provides first empirical, experiential account of women's tourism empowerment in Odisha's rural contexts (e.g., Raghurajpur, Mangalajodi)
Gap in Methodology	Dominant approach is quantitative surveys , which miss the complex, nuanced stories of women's lives	Employs reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019) with in-depth interviews to capture lived experiences, emotions, and contradictions
Gap in Pathways	Earlier studies assume a clear, direct, linear pathway between tourism participation and women's empowerment	Reveals non-linear, contested, and context-dependent pathways (e.g., fear of success/community envy, men's jealousy, infrastructural barriers)

Source: Author's own compilation based on existing data

The present study tries to fill these gaps.

3. Methodology

3.1 Philosophical Paradigm: Constructivism-Interpretivism

The philosophical basis for this investigation is the paradigm of constructivism-interpretivism (Lincoln S. Yvonna & Guba G. Egon, 1985), where the assumption of reality is socially constructed, multi-reality, and context-based. The concept of empowerment here refers to socially negotiated meanings rather than being viewed as an objective entity to measure. Thus, thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973), subjectivities, and reflexivity of the researcher with the subjects are considered essential.

3.2 Research Design: Qualitative Multiple Case Study

Multiple case study design (Yin K, 2018) was chosen because it allowed for a comparison of cases in different tourism categories while finding shared empowerment processes. Cases for analysis were selected based on the following criteria:

- Diversity in type of tourism involved: Heritage craft, wetlands ecotourism, and handloom pilgrimage.
- Level of maturity in women's involvement: Minimum three-year period of involvement.
- Geographic spread: Three different districts to avoid location-specific anomalies.

3.3 Site Selection and Description

Raghurajpur is an artisan village that is around 14 km away from Jagannath Temple at Puri. It has been awarded by UNESCO for its Pattachitra paintings. Men used to paint while the women would prepare canvas and paint. Facilitation of tourism services provided by the Odisha Crafts Council (from 2012 till date) has made the women artisans and homestays of their own.

Mangalajodi is located on the northern side of Chilika Lake, the largest brackish water lake of Asia. Poachers turned conservationists here. In 2018, nature guides training for women was initiated, which is rare in India, by the local NGO called 'Sri Sri Mahavir Pakshi Suraksha Samiti'.

Nuapatna is famous for its thousand-year-old tradition of ikat weaving. Pilgrimage tourists come to Nuapatna due to the temple of Lord Vishnu. Women ikat weavers have been promoted from the year 2015

Table : 3 Site Selection and Description

Case	District	Tourism Type	Women's Primary Roles	Year of Tourism Initiation	Women's SHG Presence
Raghurajpur	Puri	Heritage craft (Pattachitra painting, folk dance)	Artists, homestay cooks, souvenir sellers	1990s (formalized 2005)	Strong (5 active SHGs)
Mangalajodi	Khordha	Community-based wetland bird watching & photography	Nature guides, boat operators, snack vendors	2010	Moderate (3 SHGs, one women-only tourism cooperative)
Nuapatna	Cuttack	Handloom (ikat) & temple town tourism	Weavers, sales representatives, homestay managers	2008	Emerging (2 SHGs linked to tourism)

Source: Author's own compilation based on existing data

3.4 Sampling of Participants

For selecting information-rich cases, purposive sampling was used (Patton, 2015). Criteria for selecting women participants were:

- Age above 18 years.
- Active participation in any tourism-related activity for at least two years.
- Six-year residency in the villages to capture both pre- and post-tourism transformations.
- Consent to audio-record (or note-making, if the participant refused).

Further, maximum variation sampling was done on the basis of age (22-67 years), marital status (single, married, widowed, divorced), caste (General, Other Backward Classes, Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe), and education (literacy to graduation level). The inclusion of men (as husbands, brothers, or members of the village tourism committee) and key informants (NGOs' workers, district tourism officers) provided triangulation.

Data saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 2017) determined the sample size, i.e., the point where further interviews revealed no new codes or themes. Data saturation was achieved at:

- Forty-six interviews for women micro-entrepreneurs (18 in Raghurajpur, 14 in Mangalajodi, and 14 in Nuapatna).
- Six interviews of male family members (two in each village).
- Seven interviews of key informants (three NGO facilitators, two district tourism officers, and two SHG bank linkage officials).
- Total fourteen focus group discussions (five in Raghurajpur, four in Mangalajodi, and five in Nuapatna), eight to ten women in each discussion.

3.5 Data Collection Methods

- Multi-method research was employed in order to achieve methodological triangulation (Denzin, 1970).

3.5.1 In-Depth Narrative Interviews

These took place over 60-120 minutes in the Odia language conducted by the first author who is an Odia-speaking person. The interview guide moved from description to structure (Spradley, 1979):

- "Describe your typical day prior to the arrival of tourism in your village."
- "After you began working in tourism how did things change for you?"
- "What happened when you felt strong? What happened when you felt weak?"
- "How do you interpret the term 'empowerment' to you? (If hesitation: Some women say that it means talking to people outside of their family without feeling ashamed while other women say that it means owning land. What does it mean to you?)"

Narratives of significant incidents were elicited through probing questions. Interviews were recorded in audio format (n=42) and written notes (n=4 due to recording discomfort).

3.5.2 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

Two separate FGDs were conducted among younger women (22-35 years) and older women (36-67 years) to minimize embarrassment. Each FGD lasted 90-120 minutes and was facilitated by the first author and an assistant (female research associate). Discussion topics covered:

- Benefits and conflicts in SHGs.
- The transformation of norms around mobility and attire for women.
- Effects of tourism on marriages.
- Concealed fears and hopes.

For sensitive topics such as domestic violence, sexual harassment from tourists, and exclusion from village meetings, women responded anonymously through a voting approach, writing their answers on pieces of paper.

3.5.3 Participant Observation

The first author resided in each village for 5-6 weeks, observing for 120 hours throughout six months (October 2025-March 2026). The following locations were observed:

- Weekly meetings of SHGs (loan distribution, savings collection, tourism preparation).
- Meetings of tourism committees (observing which member made what contribution).
- Workplaces: looms where women weaved (Nuapatna), painting classes (Raghurajpur), boat landing spots (Mangalajodi).
- Interaction between locals and tourists (English-speaking tourists asking questions, negotiating, and taking photos).

(Emerson et al., 2011) procedure was followed to prepare field notes at night: concrete descriptions of activities, direct quotes from conversations, and tentative analysis.

3.5.4 Documentary Analysis

Documents obtained and analysed:

- Village Tourism Committee minutes from 2021 to 2025.
- Annual reports from Mission Shakti (Odisha state government’s network for women SHGs).
- Women’s savings accounts and loan books (with name de-identification).
- Tourism-related documents: Odisha Tourism Policy (2016), Odisha Ecotourism Master Plan (2021), and tourism action plans at the district level.

3.6 Data Management and Analysis

All interviews and FGDs were transcribed verbatim in Odia language and then translated to English by the first author and an external professional translator using back-translation approach for cross-referencing. With systematic coding, major themes were developed. Participant observation data were recorded in written form, along with dates and locations.

3.7 Data Analysis: Thematic Analysis

Braun and Clarke’s (2006, 2019) reflexive thematic analysis was employed for its flexibility in interpreting participant meanings. The six phases were operationalized as:

Phase 1 – Familiarization:

All transcripts read three times. Initial analytic memos noted surprising findings (e.g., women describing fear of *success*—community envy—rather than fear of failure).

Phase 2 – Generating initial codes:

Meaningful segments of data (sentences to paragraphs) were coded. A combination of **deductive codes** (derived from Kabeer’s resources-agency-achievements) and **inductive codes** (emerging from data, e.g., “mobility negotiations,” “cooking as hidden skill”).

A female respondent from Raghurajpur aged 41 stated:

“When tourists from Germany came and ate my dalma [lentil-vegetable stew], they asked for the recipe. I thought they were joking. But then they paid me 500 rupees extra and said ‘you are a chef.’ I never thought of myself as a chef.” → Codes: *self-valuation shift, foreign tourist legitimation, culinary capital*.

Phase 3 – Searching for themes:

Codes were grouped into candidate themes. For instance, codes like “controlling own earnings,” “opening bank account without husband’s signature,” “buying livestock” clustered into *economic resource control*.

Phase 4 – Reviewing themes:

Candidate themes were checked against coded extracts and entire datasets. Themes were merged (e.g., “reduced domestic conflict” and “husband’s pride” merged into *household relational transformation*), split, or discarded.

Phase 5 – Defining and naming themes:

Final themes were refined into clear definitions. The three empowerment pathways emerged clearly from this iterative process.

Phase 6 – Writing up:

The narrative weave’s themes together, using vivid participant quotations with pseudonyms.

Table:4 Tabular format based on Braun and Clarke’s (2006, 2019) six phases of reflexive thematic analysis:

Phase	Description	Operationalization in the Study	Example Quote & Coding
Phase 1 – Familiarization	Immersing in the data to become intimately familiar with its content.	All transcripts were read three times. Initial analytic memos noted surprising findings (e.g., women describing fear of success—community envy—rather than fear of failure).	N/A (memo noted: <i>fear of success/community envy</i> as a surprising pattern)
Phase 2 – Generating initial codes	Systematically coding meaningful data segments across the entire dataset.	Meaningful segments (sentences to paragraphs) were coded using a combination of deductive codes (from Kabeer’s resources-agency-achievements) and inductive codes (emerging from data, e.g., “mobility negotiations,” “cooking as hidden skill”).	“When tourists from Germany came and ate my dalma [lentil-vegetable stew], they asked for the recipe. I thought they were joking. But then they paid me 500 rupees extra and said ‘you are a chef.’ I never thought of myself as a chef.” (a female respondent, 41, Raghurajpur) → Codes: <i>self-valuation shift, foreign tourist legitimation, culinary capital</i>
Phase 3 – Searching for themes	Collating codes into potential candidate themes.	Codes were grouped into candidate themes. Example: codes like “controlling own earnings,” “opening bank account without husband’s signature,” and “buying livestock” clustered into a candidate theme of <i>economic resource control</i> .	Cluster: <i>controlling own earnings + opening bank account alone + buying livestock</i> → Candidate Theme: Economic Resource Control
Phase 4 – Reviewing themes	Checking candidate themes against coded extracts and the entire dataset.	Candidate themes were checked for consistency and distinctiveness. Themes were merged (e.g., “reduced domestic conflict” and “husband’s pride” merged into <i>household relational transformation</i>), split, or discarded.	Merge example: <i>reduced domestic conflict + husband’s pride</i> → Final Theme: Household Relational Transformation
Phase 5 – Defining and naming themes	Refining and articulating the essence of each final theme.	Final themes were refined into clear, concise definitions. The three empowerment pathways emerged clearly from this iterative process.	Final themes (examples): 1. Economic Resource Control 2. Household Relational Transformation 3. (Third empowerment pathway – implied)
Phase 6 – Writing up	Producing a scholarly narrative that weaves together the analytic story.	The narrative weave’s themes together analytically, using vivid participant quotations with pseudonyms to ground the analysis in participant voices.	Narrative example: <i>Parvati’s experience of foreign tourist legitimation illustrates a self-valuation shift, a key step in the culinary capital pathway...</i>

Source: Author’s own compilation based on existing data

4. Findings

The results are structured according to three empowerment mechanisms, each characterized by its set of challenges.

4.1 Economic Empowerment Mechanism: Invisible Work to Material Accumulation

In the pre-tourism era, women’s participation in the economy was not recognized financially. Before tourism, in Raghurajpur, women helped make the tamarind seed paste necessary for Pattachitra paintings—a skilled labor contribution that went unrewarded financially.

Pathway mechanisms: Selling and savings groups.

Female respondent from Raghurajpur aged 38 said “My husband used to sell my paintings at the Puri market and say that I had sold them for 200 rupees. The actual price was 500 rupees. But after tourists started visiting us, I realized how much I could sell my products for. Now I bargain myself.”

The most notable economic empowerment occurred through asset accumulation. Land purchases (n=7 among sites), livestock (n=19), gold jewellery (n=34 – not only consumption but also savings), and investment in daughters' education (n=12) were some ways by which women accumulated financial resources. Mangalajodi women boat drivers' group had managed to create a collective fund of ₹2.8 lakhs (US\$3,400) within 18 months.

Enabling Conditions Observed:

- **Linkage to bank:** The Mission Shakti SHGs had seed capital without having the guarantor as a man.
- **Price listing:** Rates fixed by Mangalajodi cooperative for boat rides (Rs.500/hour) and guides (Rs.300/hour). This made bargaining irrelevant and eliminated the male broker from tourism.

Persisting Barriers:

- **Cyclical pattern:** Peak activity between Oct – Feb, near-zero during April-June. Off-season earnings were obtained through selling the eggs of their poultry (common saying).
- **Exclusion of women from property ownership:** None of the women interviewed had sole ownership of the property. Without land, homestays could not be formally recognized.

4.2 Social Pathway: Renegotiating Power in Households and Communities

- Changes in the power dynamics within households and communities regarding decisions from educational choice for kids to speaking up at village councils.

Household level: 33 out of 46 women expressed that they had achieved either "equal or final say" in at least one household-level decision that was previously under the sole purview of their husbands. The most prevalent decisions were related to educating daughters (n=31), health care expenses (n=28), and son's marriage (n=18, surprisingly less, which implies patriarchal control over the male bloodline).

Female respondent from Manglajodi aged 34 said

"My husband would beat me if I attended the Anganwadi [preschool] committee meetings. Today, when the tourists call me by my name, he serves me tea. He is not perfect, but there are no beatings anymore."

At the community level, although the Village Tourism Committee (VTC) required 33% women's participation, women experienced themselves as "silent participants." At the observed Nuapatna VTC meetings (n=3), women would sit apart and speak only when asked directly by men. However, women-led subcommittees (such as quality control of homestays and food hygiene) became the real decision-making bodies.

4.3 Psychological Route: Inner Transformations and Public Image

The most profound change came on the level of psychology: women would talk about their movement from feeling 'lajja' (shame and shyness) to developing 'himmat' (courage) and finally gaining 'swabhiman' (self-respect).

Narrative by a female respondent from Nuapatna aged 55 shows how she went through transformation:

For 30 years, I would weave looking at the floor. "A woman should not make eye contact with a man," said my mother-in-law. But one day, when a Japanese tourist asked me, "why doesn't a weaver look into her work?" through a translator, I was puzzled. He showed me the colours on my sari and told me that the colours were beautiful. So, I looked for the first time at the blue and red colours like those of the river and setting sun. That night, I took a mirror from my daughter. I looked at myself. I may not be pretty but I am proud that I am the weaver of beautiful clothes. Next morning, I started signing my sarees."

Now she educates other women to sign their products.

Psychosocial factors involved:

- Positive reinforcement by foreign tourists (higher value placed on them rather than domestic tourists because of their objectivity).
 - Tech-savvy: Females who used WhatsApp and YouTube marketing gained greater self-efficacy (n=18).
 - Special awards: State level award "Best Rural Women Tourism Entrepreneurship" made two participants proud and emulated within the community.
- The existence of psychological vulnerability is evident: Women blamed themselves when they were not able to generate enough income from tourists. "Maybe if I was better educated, spoke better English, and was fair skinned, then the tourists might visit" Female respondent from Manglajodi aged 45 said.

. It is an important finding for interventions.

4.4 Intersections and Contradictions

However, empowerment was not a smooth process. Women who were younger and single (aged 22–30) benefitted from greater mobility opportunities but faced harassment, such as unwanted physical contact and sexual innuendo from male tourists. Widowhood led to greater economic independence but social isolation, no longer being invited to participate in events.

The critical paradox is that women thrived in tourism jobs precisely because they embodied traditional female traits like hospitality, care, and craftsmanship. Instead of subverting the patriarchal order, they became indispensable within it. One interviewee eloquently articulated this irony:

"I earn more than my husband now. But at night, I will still feed him before myself. If I don't, he beats me. That's how tourism works." – Female respondent from Raghurajpur aged 39 said.

5. Discussion

5.1 Women-at-the-Core Empowerment Pathways Framework (WAC-EPF)

Based on our synthesis of findings, we present the Women-at-the-Core Empowerment Pathways Framework (WAC-EPF) for sustainable rural tourism. The framework comprises three elements:

1. Core prerequisites (lack of which undermines pathways):

- Institutional scaffolding (SHGs, VTC representation by law).
- Access to assets (microcredit, skills development).
- Mobility infrastructure (secure transportation, women-only zones).

2. Three interlinked pathways:

- Economic: Direct marketing → Asset ownership → Diversified income streams.
- Social: Collective behavior → Domestic bargaining → Community leadership roles.
- Psychological: External affirmation → Self-reflection → Identity portrayal.

3. Reciprocal causality: Success in one pathway facilitates success in another (psychological empowerment leads to economic risk-taking, for instance). Failure in one pathway prevents progress in others (seasonal income disruption causes psychological regression, for example).

In contrast to previous linear frameworks, the WAC-EPF stresses recursively; women continuously cycle through empowerment phases, which is precarious and always contingent upon the context (e.g., rainy season, personal crisis, social discourse).

5.2 Theoretical Contributions

First, the research contributes to feminist political ecology by illustrating the interdependence between tourism empowerment of women and environmental access in Mangalajodi. Guiding bird tours required generational knowledge of the behaviour of birds in the wetlands, something that was overlooked in state eco-tourism policies. However, when such knowledge was recognized, there were better outcomes in conservation (decrease in fishing nets). Thus, FPE's emphasis on gendered environmental knowledge as a resource is proved right.

Second, Kabeer's model is developed for the context of tourism. The dimension of resources should include heritage and craft knowledge as a gendered resource. Agency is not an individual concept but rather a notion of distribution agency involving women acting through SHGs, cooperatives, and even proxies (husbands). Achievements can be seen as momentary achievements of recognition (such as when a foreigner praises dalma).

5.3 Comparison with Existing Literature

The study results are consistent with the warning raised by (Scheyvens, 2002) regarding the illusionary nature of empowerment in the absence of structural transformation. Nevertheless, contrary to research conducted in sub-Saharan Africa (Mutanga et al., 2025), wherein tourism tends to exacerbate women's unpaid workload, the female participants in Odisha experienced a decrease in their housework chores due to partial involvement of the menfolk (observations included cooking, taking care of children in the busy season).

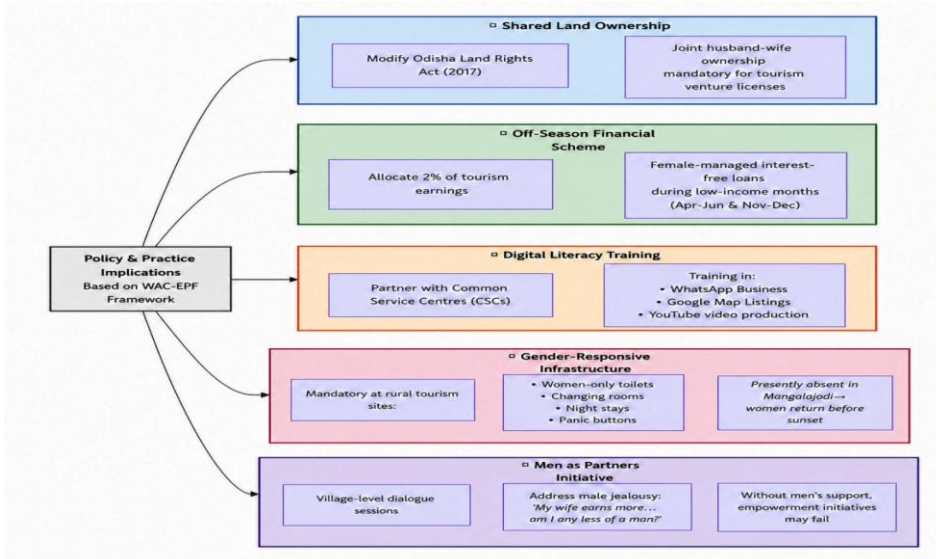
Contrary to the homestay program in Kerala (David et al., 2019), where women had access to online booking services provided by the government, the lack of such facilities in Odisha resulted in the need for reliance on travel agencies owned by men.

5.4 Policy and Practice Implications

According to the WAC-EPF, the following five recommendations are proposed for action:

1. **Shared land ownership rights for tourism ventures:** Modify the Odisha Land Rights Act (2017) to make joint husband-wife ownership mandatory for tourism venture license application.
2. **Off-season financial stability scheme:** Allocate 2% of tourism earnings towards a female-managed scheme that offers interest-free loans during low-income months (April–June and November–December).
3. **Universal training for women’s digital literacy:** Partner with Common Service Centres (CSCs) for training in WhatsApp business, basic Google Map listings, and YouTube video production to market tourism services.
4. **Gender-responsive tourism infrastructure:** Ensure that all rural tourism sites have facilities such as women-only toilets, changing rooms, night stays, and panic buttons. Presently, their absence in Mangalajodi compels women to return home before sunset, missing out on the evening rush of tourists.
5. **Men as partners initiative:** Organize village-level dialogue sessions to help men cope with jealousy towards successful women. (“My wife earns more money than me, am I any less of a man?”) Without men’s support, any empowerment initiatives may fail.

Figure2: Policy & Practice Framework based on WAC-EPF



(Source: Author’s own compilation based on existing data)

5.5 Limitations and Directions for Further Study

There are four limitations recognized. First, the failure to include women who attempted tourism and left was another gap identified in this study. Tourism exit paths need to be explored in future studies. Second, the six months of fieldwork data included seasonal differences but did not consider tourism empowerment sustainability over time periods (5 years+). A longitudinal ethnography is warranted here. Third, caste factors could not be fully addressed owing to the sensitivity of the topic. This needs to be considered in future studies, where attention to Dalit/Adivasi women tourists’ experiences is required. **Fourth**, researcher positionality (first author, upper-caste, educated) may have shaped what women felt safe sharing. Prolonged engagement and member checking partially mitigated this.

Table: 5 Limitation, description and future research direction

Limitation	Description	Mitigation (where applicable)	Future Research Direction
1. Exclusion of tourism leavers	The study excluded women who tried tourism work but failed or left—a significant missing perspective on barriers and dissatisfaction.	—	Trace tourism exit trajectories and reasons for discontinuation.
2. Limited temporal scope	Six months of fieldwork captured seasonal fluctuations but cannot assess empowerment sustainability over longer periods (5+ years).	—	Conduct a longitudinal ethnographic study to track empowerment durability.
3. Caste under-addressed	Caste dynamics were underexplored due to the sensitivity of the topic within the research context.	—	Explicitly center Dalit and Adivasi women's tourism experiences.
4. Researcher positionality	First author (upper-caste, educated) may have shaped what women felt safe sharing during interviews.	Prolonged engagement and member checking partially mitigated this bias.	

Source: Author’s compilation based on existing data

6. Conclusion

This qualitative analysis has illustrated how sustainable rural tourism in Odisha could bring women from the margin to the centre: economic, social, and psychological, but only with intentional, multi-scalar intervention. The Women-at-the-Core Empowerment Pathways Framework (WAC-EPF) can serve as an evidence-based and context-specific instrument for policymakers, NGOs, and tourism stakeholders. The voices of women in this research require that we recognize a paradox: that tourism creates unique possibilities while reinforcing longstanding inequities. Rather than abandoning tourism as the culprit, we must reconsider its design with the realities and resistance strategies of women at the forefront. Without gender equity, sustainable rural tourism cannot be truly sustainable or just. With women at the centre, Odisha’s rural communities may serve as templates for a new kind of development: where a weaver gazes into her creation, signs her name, and meets the world.

7. References

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