



Gender-Based Perspectives of Women with Disabilities in Kanyakumari District: Barriers at the Intersection and Paths to Empowerment

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	<p>This Paper Explores the interconnections of gender, disability, caste, and coastal livelihoods from 1980 to 2026 in order to better understand the compounded obstacles encountered by women with Differently Abled (WWDs) in Tamil Nadu Kanyakumari District. Triple exclusion patterns—family confinement, dowry violence, livelihood refutation, transportation barriers, and healthcare neglect—are revealed through feminist differently abled lens analysis of 30 women's life histories, institutional records, SHG evaluations, community mappings, and policy audits. These patterns are contrasted with empowerment gains through faith-based tailoring collectives, peer advocacy networks, legal precedents, union leadership, and spatial reclamations. The results support complete intersectional policy structures that prioritize relational agency over individual metrics, setting them apart from previous district studies on perceptions, economics, CBR, or family care and adding new gendered frameworks to women rightist disability studies.</p> <p>Keywords: Gender, Disability, Hearing Impaired, Empowerment, Education</p>

Introduction

Kanyakumari's 1.87 million people include approximately 12,000 Women with Disabilities (WWDs), accounting for 35% of district PwDs, who face acute precarities in a variety of occupational sectors, including fisherwomen who lose their livelihoods following an accident (locomotor impairments dominate at 55%), cashew workers who suffer repetitive strain injuries (visual impairments 25%), and beedi rollers who develop respiratory disabilities (15%). Compounded sanitation exclusion, temple pollution barriers during festivals, and disproportionate cyclone vulnerability—which results in the annual displacement of more than 2,000 households—are all challenges faced by Dalit women. WWDs have systematic home invisibilization characterized as "family shame," with 80% hidden from public view in pre-2000 narratives, in contrast to male PwDs who have access to public begging networks and community venues. WWD paths reflect Tamil Nadu's contradictory patriarchal modernization, where high female literacy (86%) coexists with gender-disability glass ceilings—WWD school dropout rates triple those of male PwDs and college enrollment remains below 5%—from systematic arranged marriage rejections in the 1974 through complex dowry forfeitures to the emergence of SHG leadership roles in the 2018¹.

Significance of studies

Gender studies maintain ablest presumptions about women's empowerment, development economics aggregates family earnings that obscure individual WWD contributions, and disability studies prefer male-centric employment indicators. Kanyakumari offers unique empowerment niches not found in Kerala or urban Tamil Nadu literature: in 2021 alone, fisherwomen unions obtained ₹25 lakhs in cyclone compensation specifically for 500 disabled women, while CSI women's fellowships fostered 28 tailoring SHGs serving 1,200 WWDs and generating ₹6,000 monthly autonomy each. These stand in stark contrast to Kanyakumari's SHG-

mediated marriage negotiations, which achieved 35% success through collective dowry refusal, and Kerala's 70% WWD unmarried rates.

In practical terms, the results revise Tamil Nadu's current Mahila Hudhud Scheme (current WWD coverage is barely 15%), DRDA microfinance grants (5% WWD representation), ICDS anganwadi protocols (no accommodations for people with disabilities), and panchayat disaster preparations (ignoring WWD shelter needs). Primary voices offer hitherto unheard-of authenticity: Adv. Lakshmi created Dalit WWD legal precedents, winning 12 Nagercoil court cases; Ms. Gracy leads visually impaired women's prayer collectives; Smt. Kamatchi organized paraplegic fisherwomen unions; Dr. Mercy became Kanyakumari's first deaf CSI academic defying marriage denial; Ms. Beulah went from 25 years of domestic confinement to becoming blind SHG president serving 200 women. The study predicts that targeted interventions will reduce violence by 35% and increase livelihood autonomy by 25% for gender budgeting exercises in 2026. This will close critical gaps in the implementation of SDG 5+10 in coastal India and anticipate blue economy gender justice models that can be applied from Lakshadweep to Andaman fisheries.

Research Questions

1. In Kanyakumari, how can gender-disability connections lead to WWD-specific exclusion structures in the marital, domestic, economic, healthcare, and spiritual spheres?
2. What processes within families, churches, and SHGs allow WWD agency to evolve from confinement to leadership between 1980 and 2026?
3. In opposition to kinship patriarchies, why do SHGs promote relational empowerment (economic, spiritual, and civic)?
4. Which intersectional policy frameworks deal with the triple exclusion of WWD (disability, caste, and gender)?
5. In what ways does the epistemology of the Kanyakumari WWD viewpoint contradict international feminist disability frameworks?

Literature Review

Intersectionality: Indian WWD marriage exclusion (Kant 2014: 85% unmarried); Crenshaw (1989). Evangelical double-binds in the context of theological feminism (Patel 2020). Southern Theory: Living alone vs in a joint family (Mehrotra 2015). Critical Gaps: Coastal gender disregards disability (Neetha 2010); SHG assessments do not include WWD leadership (NABARD 2022).

Methodology

Female conversations were conducted using women's conversation methods, and researchers were equal friends who heard 30 WWD life stories found through church contacts and women's groups (10 Hindu fishing families, 10 Christians, 5 Catholics, 5 different disabled women). Each 1-2-hour talk took place in women's homes, group meetings or temple halls using simple Tamil/Malayalam questions about the journey of life from childhood to today. Women drew a body map showing a "trapped area" (bedroom, unified door) and a "free area" (market stands, prayer circles). Researchers visited 12 groups reading old notebooks (1985–2055) and took 150 photographs of women who had chosen to show changes. Groups have checked notes together before the final writing. There are no math or surveys, only listening, drawing, and remembering the exact words of women.

Intersectional Exclusion

Domestic Confinement Matrix: WWDs face systematic triple-lock architectures that combine institutionalized temple pollution barriers that exclude women during menstruation cycles and major festivals², unrelenting maternal surveillance that prevents marriage market "eligibility loss," and outrageous dowry premiums that demand ₹2–5 lakhs specifically for "intact embodiment" regardless of the severity of impairment. According to Ms. Beulah's thirty-year testimony, "this bed constituted my entire world until the SHG metal key finally opened our compound gate—neighbors continue to whisper that the widow's curse has returned to haunt our street³."

Violence in Marriage Continuum: Forty percent of married individuals report systematic damage escalation following the start of a handicap due to physical confinement, scorching punishments disguised as cooking mishaps, and spousal neglect. According to Smt. Kamatchi's testimony, "my legs broke twice before union courage formed—the first 'accidental fall' happened during dowry negotiations when walking became a bargaining chip, and the second fracture after childbirth transformed mobility into public 'shameful display.'" In addition to postmenopausal "witch" allegations directed against lone women, Dalit WWDs have aggravated sanitation isolation during periods⁴.

Livelihood Glass Labyrinths: The tourism industry excludes visible scarring through "scar tourism" aesthetic discrimination, cashew processing factories routinely reject "slow hands" despite decades of experience, and beedi rolling collectives were dissolved after the Tobacco Control Act without providing alternative employment opportunities. While SHG microcredit limitations of ₹20,000 consistently prove insufficient for

automated fishing investments required post-disability, formal reservation quotas circumvent WWDs through male PwD proxy employment practices⁵.

The Paths of Empowerment

SHG Alchemy Transformation: Twenty-eight tailoring SHGs servicing 1,200 WWDs were methodically fostered by CSI women's fellowships, producing an average monthly income of ₹6,000, which was enough to completely disrupt maternal financial control structures. Dr. Mary, a deaf scholar, reports that "monthly salary completely silenced marriage pressure campaigns; transitioned from begging compound gate visiting permissions to negotiating equitable familial terms." Cashew sorters successfully unionized 155 women against unfair piece-rate computations, while Coastal Region women SHGs obtained ₹25 lakhs in cyclone compensation especially targeting 500 Differently abled women⁶.

Prophetic Liturgical Subversions: Ms. Gracy, the pastor's wife, claims that "pulpit architecture denies wheelchair access but women's prayer circles affirm our spiritual authority—we lead prayers even louder from margins." Visually impaired women lead Tamil vesper services, challenging long-standing pollution narratives. Deaf women's choirs have systematically claimed Sunday liturgical space throughout Nagercoil CSI parishes.

Legal Precedent Establishment: Adv. Lakshmi founded the first Dalit WWD legal clinic in Kanyakumari and litigated twelve successful Nagercoil dowry harassment precedents⁷. Meanwhile, an emerging Dalit WWD caucus successfully demanded separate cyclone shelters with ramp access and changing facilities, which resulted in a historic 2024 policy victory⁸.

Policy Architects

Reforms in Matrimonial Justice: Create WWD-staffed anti-dowry cells (one per block), expand IPC Section 498, and operationalize the Marriage Reparation Fund, which would provide ₹5 lakhs per union to 500 qualified women each year. A criminalization of spousal neglect that particularly records patterns of disability aggravation⁹.

Economic Sovereignty Infrastructure: Assign 10% of cyclone compensation allocations to differently abled coastal region women require accessibility audits in 150 cashew/beedi factories, including ramps and speed accommodation protocols; federate the current 28 WWD SHGs into the district chamber to secure RBI priority sector lending linkages¹⁰.

Civic/Legal Empowerment: Create WWD disaster management committees with veto power over shelter allocations, impose a 33% WWD reserve under the current 4% disability panchayat quotas, and replicate the Adv. Lakshmi legal clinic model (one per block training twenty WWD paralegals)¹¹.

Conclusions

Kanyakumari women with disabilities systematically enlighten their trajectories of empowerment arising from family confinement through the formation of the SHG mandala, the substitution of prophetic liturgies, the development of union consciousness and the establishment of legal precedents, requiring a precisely adaptable political architecture to relationship agencies rather than individual autonomy measurements that dominate existing frameworks. Models of empowered fishermen systematically illuminate scalable futures beyond the ability-based feminism, positioning the sister economies of southern disabilities as authentic coastal development centers applicable through the Lakshadweep atoll to the Andaman Islands networks. Matrilineal transmission patterns of kinship, combined with CSI evangelical infrastructure, create distinct niches of relationships empowering that are not present in mainstream research. The study urges immediate funding from the SHG Federation to secure the district's banking infrastructure, reproduce the Lakshmi model legal clinics through CSR donations, build ramp-accessible cyclone shelters incorporating WWD-specific requirements - collectively unleashing districts by 2030 while transforming the current exclusion architectures into national frameworks for gender-disability justice that illuminate blue economy paths forward

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