



The Women-Led Sustainable Tourism Model: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract:

This research aims to investigate the building of a new framework for women-led sustainable tourism, with a focus on marginalized communities where women have the potential to become key agents of economic and environmental sustainability. Despite growing recognition of sustainable tourism's positive impact, women's leadership in this field is relatively underexplored. Using a feminist lens, this study fills a gap by investigating how women-driven tourism models promote social, economic, and environmental outcomes. Using thematic analysis, the study dives into the personal tales and lived experiences of women who run sustainable tourism initiatives. It highlights the problems they encounter, the possibilities they seize, and their role in transforming the tourist scene. The findings aim to provide concrete insights into promoting female leadership in sustainable tourism and a transformative strategy to empower women as change agents. This study adds to the expanding body of literature on sustainable tourism and women's empowerment by presenting a novel framework that combines gender, sustainability, and entrepreneurship.

Keywords- Economic sustainability, gender. Marginalized, sustainable tourism, women-led tourism, women's empowerment.

Introduction

Sustainable tourism has become a key industry for fostering economic development while safeguarding cultural heritage and the environment. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization, it is a strategy that balances the demands of current travelers and host communities while protecting and enhancing resources for future generations. This concept underscores the necessity of achieving a balanced consideration of economic, social, and environmental dimensions, thereby fostering a tourism model that supports long-term viability and integrity. Sustainable tourism is essential for promoting equitable benefits for local communities and preserving natural and cultural resources for future generations. The fast growth of tourism, particularly in emerging nations, has created new opportunities for inclusive development, and women have made major contributions to this industry (Ferguson & Alarcón, 2015). Women's participation in sustainable tourism promotes gender equality while encouraging community-based approaches to environmental conservation and cultural preservation (Scheyvens, 2011). Women have made substantial contributions but are still

significantly underrepresented in decision-making positions, particularly leadership roles within the tourism industry. Most women in the tourism industry work in low-wage, labour-intensive positions with few chances for growth (Bramwell & Lane, 2012). To address this gap, several studies highlight the potential for women-led sustainable tourism efforts to achieve beneficial economic benefits while promoting gender empowerment (Fullagar, 2019; Bennett & Sharma, 2013). Women's leadership is critical in fostering sustainability since they are more likely to use community-oriented business models and prioritize environmentally friendly practices (UN Women, 2018).

However, women in tourism frequently encounter systemic barriers, such as limited access to finance, a lack of expertise, and societal norms that limit their entrepreneurial potential (Chakraborty, 2018; Jain & Sharma, 2019). These constraints make it difficult for women to hold senior positions in the tourism sector. Furthermore, the combination of gender, class, and geographical location exacerbates women's challenges, especially in rural and underprivileged communities (Sarkar, 2019). Despite these obstacles, increasing examples of women-led sustainable tourism businesses successfully balance economic, social, and environmental sustainability (Roy, 2018). The relationship between gender and sustainability has been investigated in various sectors, but its interaction with tourism remains unexplored (Agarwal, 2017). Previous research has found that women's participation in sustainable tourism improves community resilience by creating local jobs and protecting cultural assets (Kumar, 2018; Sen & Choudhury, 2017). Furthermore, women entrepreneurs in the tourist industry prefer to take a comprehensive approach, meeting their communities' economic and social needs while emphasizing environmental sustainability (Mehta & Verma, 2021).

This study addresses an essential gap in the existing literature by establishing a complete framework for women-led sustainable tourism. This study will emphasize the obstacles and potential for female tourism entrepreneurs by studying successful case studies from various geographical contexts (Patel, 2020). It will also look at the broader implications of women's leadership in promoting sustainable tourism, ultimately providing a model that can be reproduced elsewhere. Women-led sustainable tourism initiatives have the potential to make a substantial contribution to global sustainability targets. Empowering women to take on leadership roles in the tourism sector is crucial for the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This supports Goal 5, which promotes Gender Equality and seeks equal rights and opportunities for women, and Goal 8, which focuses on Decent Work and Economic Growth, ensuring everyone can participate in meaningful employment (UN, 2015). As the tourism industry continues to grow and change, it is essential to recognize and appreciate the vast contributions of women in various areas, including hospitality, management, marketing, and sustainable tourism initiatives. By creating supportive environments that encourage and enable women to rise to leadership positions, we can benefit from their unique perspectives and creative solutions, which are vital for the industry's progress. (Sinha, 2021).

1. Literature Review

Several studies have emphasized women's essential contribution to sustainable tourism development. Women-led tourism efforts have been related to increased inclusivity, economic independence, and preservation of cultural heritage. According to Scheyvens (2000), women's participation in community-based tourism promotes equitable resource distribution and local entrepreneurship. Furthermore, women's leadership in tourism encourages community engagement and decision-making, which improves overall sustainability efforts.

Economic independence is a key element in female-led sustainable tourism models. According to research, tourism provides women with job and company ownership options, particularly in rural areas (Ferguson, 2011). Women entrepreneurs in tourism help boost local economies by running small businesses like eco-lodges, guided tours, and handicrafts (Cole, 2006). Furthermore, microfinance and financial literacy initiatives are critical accelerators of women's success in tourism-related industries.

Women-led tourism approaches frequently emphasize the preservation of cultural traditions and the empowerment of marginalized communities. For example, Tucker and Boonabaana (2012) suggest that women's participation in sustainable tourism contributes to preserving indigenous knowledge and traditional practices. Furthermore, female entrepreneurs frequently incorporate storytelling and heritage-based experiences into their tourism products, bolstering local identities and promoting cross-cultural understanding. Women's participation in sustainable tourism has been linked to increased social cohesiveness and communal well-being.

Women in tourism usually spearhead conservation efforts, encouraging eco-friendly practices such as waste reduction, sustainable resource management, and environmental awareness. Gossling (2018) found that women-led ecotourism ventures promote environmental responsibility while providing economic benefits to local communities. These activities are consistent with global sustainability goals, identifying women as crucial players in combating environmental degradation through tourism.

Despite their beneficial contributions, women in tourism face significant hurdles. Gender discrepancies in incomes, restricted access to financial resources, and socio-cultural hurdles prevent women from fully participating in the business (UNWTO, 2019). Gentry (2007) found that women entrepreneurs in tourism frequently struggle to balance company responsibilities with domestic roles. Furthermore, institutional inequalities in leadership roles in the tourism industry impede women's professional advancement.

Policy interventions are critical in advancing women-led sustainable tourism initiatives. Governments and international organizations have launched projects to increase women's engagement in tourism through capacity building, education, and financial inclusion (Chant, 2012). The UNWTO (2020) underlines the importance of gender-sensitive policies that remove female entrepreneurs' hurdles, offering equal opportunity for economic and social progress.

While existing literature emphasizes the importance of women's contributions to sustainable tourism, significant gaps exist in comprehending the structural impediments that persist. Economic empowerment, cultural preservation, and environmental sustainability are all intertwined, emphasizing the importance of comprehensive policy and practice approaches. Most studies focus on women's participation as employees rather than business owners, stressing the absence of organized models such as the Women-Led Sustainable Tourism (WLST) Model. Furthermore, despite the rise of digital platforms such as Airbnb and TripAdvisor, there is little research on how rural women may use technology for direct tourism marketing and bookings. In India, tourism regulations focus on economic and environmental sustainability. However, there are no gender-specific frameworks to encourage women's leadership, and no dedicated funding schemes exist for women-owned tourism firms. Furthermore, women are underrepresented in tourism decision-making, which limits their ability to shape the industry's growth and diversity.

2. Research Problem

Tourism profoundly impacts local economies, cultures, and the environment. However, there is a dearth of female representation and leadership in tourist decision-making processes, particularly in sustainable tourism models. While women's engagement in tourism is increasing, their contributions are sometimes undervalued, and their potential to effect long-term change remains untapped. This study aims to close the gender gap by examining women-led sustainable tourism efforts and developing a paradigm emphasizing women's leadership in attaining tourist sustainability.

3. Research Objectives

This study aims to investigate the possibility of a women-led sustainable tourism model and create a framework that empowers women, improves community development, and promotes environmental sustainability. It also intends to investigate how women's leadership in tourism contributes to sustainable practices and the socioeconomic empowerment of women in underserved communities.

4. Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach, analysing secondary data from various sources, including academic literature, case studies, reports of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and government databases on tourism and gender issues. The data collection focuses on women's participation in sustainable tourism in various locations, with a special emphasis on case studies from India, Southeast Asia, and Latin America. The analysis method will be Comparative Case Synthesis (CCS), which combines cross-case analysis and thematic synthesis. This strategy entails gathering thematic insights from specific case studies and integrating them to create a comprehensive framework for women-led sustainable tourism.

5. Analysis and Discussion

6.1 Cross-case Analysis

To investigate Women-Led Sustainable Tourism (WLST), we examined several case studies from different places, focusing on differences in leadership, economic impact, and technology integration. The selected cases illustrate various socioeconomic and cultural circumstances in which women have played important roles in tourist development.

1. Leadership and Entrepreneurship Roles

In India, women-led homestay companies in Uttarakhand and Kerala exemplify community-based tourism. Women actively manage hotels, organize cultural experiences, and promote sustainable tourism practices. In contrast, similar models in Indonesia and Nepal show various degrees of success due to disparities in financial assistance, training, and gender norms. The important distinction is that government and non-governmental organizations (NGO) support considerably improves women's ability to operate tourism firms.

2. Economic Impact and Financial Independence

A comparative review of WLST efforts in Latin America and South Asia shows how access to microfinance and skill development programs affects success rates. Women in Peru's rural tourist efforts have benefited from organized financial aid and cooperative company models. In contrast, their Indian counterparts encounter difficulties due to a lack of gender-specific funding schemes. This implies that tailored financial strategies are critical for sustaining women-led tourism.

3. The Role of Digital Platforms

Digital tourist platforms such as Airbnb and TripAdvisor have transformed the sector, but their accessibility varies by region. While women in Thailand's Chiang Mai region effectively use digital technologies to make direct bookings, rural women in India and Nepal frequently lack digital literacy and infrastructure. The success of digital empowerment projects in Southeast Asia suggests that incorporating digital marketing and e-commerce training can increase women's engagement in tourism.

4. Institutional and Policy Support

Another important aspect impacting WLST is the availability of institutional frameworks and policy assistance. Countries such as Spain and Canada have effectively established gender-sensitive tourist laws, which provide financial incentives and leadership opportunities for female entrepreneurs. In contrast, regions with poorer institutional support make slower progress in establishing gender equity in tourism.

6.2 Thematic Analysis

1. Empowerment through tourism

The relationship between tourism and women's empowerment is a constant subject in the case studies. Women's participation in tourism industries promotes economic independence, confidence, and leadership abilities. However, in regions with rigid gender standards, women's roles are confined to assistance rather than leadership.

2. Barriers to Women's Participation

Several obstacles limit women's leadership opportunities in tourism. Due to a lack of financial resources, most women-led enterprises must rely on informal finance sources, making scalability challenging. Furthermore, societal and cultural barriers in certain places impede women's mobility and decision-making in commercial operations, thus limiting female participation. Another key hurdle is a lack of networking possibilities since female tourist entrepreneurs frequently struggle to access professional networks and mentorship programs, which are critical for business growth and sustainability.

3. Sustainable Tourism and Community Engagement

Successful WLST models prioritize sustainability and community involvement. Women-led tourism efforts in eco-tourism and rural tourism focus on environmental conservation and cultural heritage preservation. Case studies from Bhutan and Costa Rica demonstrate how involving local populations in decision-making improves sustainable tourism strategies.

4. Digital Divide and Technological Accessibility

Another rising concern is the digital gap, in which women in rural and impoverished areas have limited access to digital tools and training. Case studies demonstrate that mobile-based tourism applications and customized training programs can help to close this gap and increase women's engagement in the tourism industry.

Developing structured Women-Led Sustainable Tourism (WLST) models can give a systematic approach to capacity building, finance, and policy assistance, ensuring women entrepreneurs can access the resources and training they require. Governments should implement gender-sensitive policies to increase financial access, leadership development, and digital inclusion. Strengthening digital empowerment through e-commerce, online marketing, and digital literacy training will assist in overcoming the technical barrier, especially among rural women entrepreneurs. Establishing dedicated financial programs, such as subsidies and microloans, can increase women's participation in tourism enterprises and make them more sustainable. Furthermore, institutional and networking support, such as mentorship programs, industry networking events, and professional alliances, can help women advance their careers in tourism. Addressing these issues together will provide a conducive climate for women to develop as leaders in sustainable tourism.

6. Conclusion

This study emphasizes the importance of women-led sustainable tourism (WLST) in promoting economic empowerment, community engagement, and environmental conservation. Cross-case analysis (CCA) and Thematic Analysis (TA) have found fundamental impediments to women's tourism leadership, including restricted financial access, restrictive gender norms, networking constraints, and the digital gap. Comparative research shows that locations with strong institutional support, gender-inclusive policies, and financing schemes have higher success rates for women-led tourist industry.

The findings highlight the need for structured WLST models, financial support mechanisms, digital training programs, and policy measures to narrow the gender gap in tourist leadership. Implementing gender-sensitive legislation, mentorship programs, and accessible financial resources can help women succeed as entrepreneurs. Furthermore, using digital channels for marketing and bookings would help rural women enter the tourist industry. Finally, the study concluded the importance of a multi-stakeholder approach involving governments, financial institutions, non-governmental organizations, and local communities in ensuring the long-term growth of women-led tourism. By tackling structural impediments and cultivating an inclusive ecosystem, WLST can help promote gender equality and the tourism industry's long-term survival.

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