

# Women Empowerment Through Tourism: Options – Concerns – Transformation

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**Abstract:** The tourism industry claims to be a major employer of women globally, but this is an industry that is far from gender just. This paper examines ways in which women can have greater access, control and ownership over livelihoods and natural resources as well as access to the benefits in the context of tourism. By evolving greater gender-sensitive models and policies, tourism can play a pivotal role in women empowerment.

**Keywords:** Women Empowerment, Gender Equality, Sustainable Development, Education, Employment.

The economic benefits of tourism are loud and clear. It, undoubtedly, is world's biggest industry with an annual receipt of more than US\$ 1030 billion in 2011. And of course, it is world's biggest employer with direct employment to 85 million and indirect to 150 million people. What takes the governments of the world to sit up and take notice of tourism is its rapid increase in foreign exchange earnings and employment potential in last two decades. International tourism is the world's largest export earner and an important factor in the balance of payments of many countries. Foreign currency receipts from international tourism account for 30% of the world export of services, outstripping exports of petroleum products, motor vehicles, telecommunications equipment, textiles or any other product or service. The tourism industry provides governments with hundreds of millions of dollars in tax revenues each year through accommodation and restaurant taxes, airport users' fees, sales taxes, park entrance fees, employee income tax and many other fiscal measures. International and domestic tourism combined generate up to 10 per cent of the world's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and a considerably higher share in many small nations and developing countries. Tourism is an important job creator, employing millions of people around the world. The vast majority of tourism jobs are in small or medium-sized, family-owned enterprises that are usually created in the most underdeveloped regions of a country, helping to equalize economic opportunities throughout a nation and providing an incentive for residents to remain in rural areas rather than move to overcrowded cities (Sawarkar, 2007). When authorities restore monuments, open museums and establish natural parks to lure visitors, a sleepy hamlet like Konark or Khajuraho can catapult into an international tourist destination thereby giving a boost to the local environment and culture. For India, with 75% of its people living in rural areas, tourism is the best bet to curb migration to urban areas and decongest our cities and women can play major role to make this a reality.

## **1. WOMEN EMPOWERMENT**

Different people use empowerment to mean different things. However there are four aspects which seem to be generally accepted in the literature on women's empowerment (Bansal & Kumar, 2011). Firstly to be empowered one must have been disempowered. It is relevant to speak of empowering women, for example, because, as a group, they are disempowered relative to men. Secondly empowerment cannot be bestowed by a third party. Rather those who would become empowered must claim it. Development agencies cannot therefore empower women—the most they can achieve is to facilitate women empowering themselves. They may be able to create conditions favorable to empowerment but they cannot make it happen. Thirdly, definitions of empowerment usually include a sense of people making decisions on matters which are important in their lives and being able to carry them out. Reflection, analysis and action are involved in this process which may happen on an individual or a collective level. There is some evidence that while women's own struggles for empowerment have tended to be collective efforts, empowerment-orientated development interventions often focus more on the level of the individual. Finally empowerment is an ongoing process rather than a product. There is no final goal. One does not arrive at a stage of being empowered in some absolute sense. People are empowered, or disempowered, relative to others or, importantly, relative to themselves at a previous time.

## **2. WOMEN AND TOURISM**

Empowering women to participate in economic development at all levels and in all sectors is essential to building strong economies and stable, just societies. Tourism provides significant opportunities for both women and men. According to UNWTO Highlights 2010, tourism's contribution to employment is estimated to be 6% to 7% of the overall number of jobs worldwide (direct and indirect). One in twelve of the world's workers are employed in the travel and tourism industry. In developing countries where women have less access to education and often have greater household responsibilities, the low barriers to entry, flexible working hours, and part-time work present potential opportunities for employment.

Tourism can also help poor women break the poverty cycle through formal and informal employment, entrepreneurship, training, and community betterment. Not all women are benefitting equally from tourism development, however. In some cases, lack of education and resources may prevent the poorest women from benefitting from tourism development. While in some regions tourism helps empower women, in other regions, tourism negatively affects the lives of women and perpetuates existing economic and gender inequalities.

## **3. OPTIONS**

Let us now discuss the options that this industry has to offer for the fairer sex. Traditionally women have found ground in tourism industry with softer roles like airhostess, front office executive, events manager or even restaurant bearers. They, of course, have a

larger presence as field level workers in the handicraft and the like industries. With opening up of the economy choices galore for women who have nerves of steel and are determined to make their mark in the industry. There are opportunities at every level – be it managerial or executive or at field level. First among them is becoming a domain expert. This includes academicians who is well versed about the tourism concepts as well as professionals who with their prolong association with the industry have acquired expertise in their respective discipline. This area still seems to be dominated by male and calls for increasing women’s participation. Secondly, they can make their presence felt in the hospitality industry. Every single department of a hotel can accommodate women in their roles. To name a few are housekeeping, food and beverages (traditionally known as F & B), accounts, front office, guest relation, travel desk and marketing. For those looking for a part time job and quick bucks, call centers could be a good option. A number of major hotel chains have centralized their reservation process through call centers established.

Thirdly, one can easily make a career in travel agencies and tour operator with degree or diploma in travel and tourism management. However, one has to be very clear whether she should go for inbound or outbound tours. Some of the agencies offer services like visa assistance or car rental in which women can comfortably take up as a career. Fourthly, with a boom in aviation industry both India and world, there are a host of opportunity that come s in the way of women. In-flight hospitality has traditionally been a female bastion. With more and more airlines joining the mad race, airhostess can be a rewarding career. Moreover, booking of air ticket has become a lucrative business. A short term ticketing course can give a woman a comfortable yet well paid job. Fifthly, entertainment forms an integral part of tourism today. The theme parks like Essel World have become immensely popular with urban mass. Going by its success many water park, computer games center have come up in the outskirts of major metropolis. There is always demand

**Table 1:**

10 Key Issues	Possible Solutions
Women’s role in the informal sector	Supporting women in the informal sector
Women’s status in the labour market	Promoting equal pay for women and the promotion of women to senior positions
Women’s participation in development projects	Supporting women’s participation in tourism decision-making
Sexual exploitation and trafficking	Protecting women from sexual exploitation
Women’s access to credit	Assisting women to access to land and microloans
Social entrepreneurship	Encouraging women to partner with NGOs
Women’s access to land	Working conditions for women in tourism
Legal rights for women in tourism in employment	Helping companies improve benefits for workers with children
Community development initiatives	Promoting low-capital home-based craft industries
Skills, training, and education	Education and training for women in tourism

Source: UN World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO)

for quality staff at such entertainment centers. Last but not the least, one can easily find employment in many allied services that form part and partial of the tourism industry today. Some of them are making and selling souvenir and handicrafts, 24-hr coffee shops, bookshop and photography kiosk etc. Women can readily get employed in beauty parlor or health spas, the other well-known allied services of the tourism industry.

#### 4. CONCERNS

However, issues and concerns that intimidate the life of a woman in travel and tourism are many. First among them is non-availability of right education in vicinity. Tourism being a service industry needs professional training and education. But such training is often not available in small towns and villages. As a result, women have to relocate from their home to major cities in search good education, risking their safety and security. Secondly, even if they complete their professional training and education & training, the fierce competition for job makes it difficult for them to find suitable placement in the male dominated industry. Many vague reasons, such as less intelligence and capability, are given to prove the suitability of a male candidate. Whereas scientific studies and facts from the industry prove that women are equally intelligent and capable.

Thirdly, non-availability of cheap credit which hold the women back from making an entrepreneurial venture. The matter becomes worse in subsistence occupations. Many uneducated women in rural areas are engaged in tourism allied services such as making handicraft look forward to local moneylender and thereby fall prey to his tricks. Worse is that, after some point of time the moneylender starts asking for sexual favours and these women keep getting exploited silently. Fourthly, women's safety and security is matter of concern that cuts across the industry and tourism is no exception. Sexual harassment is so much omnipresent that it does not make a difference whether you are at office or at home, leave alone the petty crimes like eve teasing on the road or at bus stops. More importantly, it is rampant in metro cities where women are most likely to find employment in the tourism industry. Last but not the least, the biggest challenge is the negative attitude of the society against women. So much so that she is killed even before she is born. The declining sex ratio and the increasing female foeticide is indeed alarming. Even if she takes birth, the social evils like child marriage, dowry and immoral trafficking makes her life so miserable that she is sometimes forced to end her life.

Here, it is worth mentioning about the efforts by UNWTO, which in its Global Report on Women in Tourism 2010 has identified 10 key issues and its possible solution [Table 1].

#### 5. TRANSFORMATION

Ampumuza etal (2008) in their mind map [Figure 1] calls for empowerment of women in four major areas namely – physical, political, socio cultural and economical. However, of late a lot of welcome changes are brought about to make the life of working women in general and women in tourism in particular better. Broadly five changes can make the life of women in tourism better. First among all is easy access to tourism education. Earmarking certain percentage of seats in tourism professional courses and providing

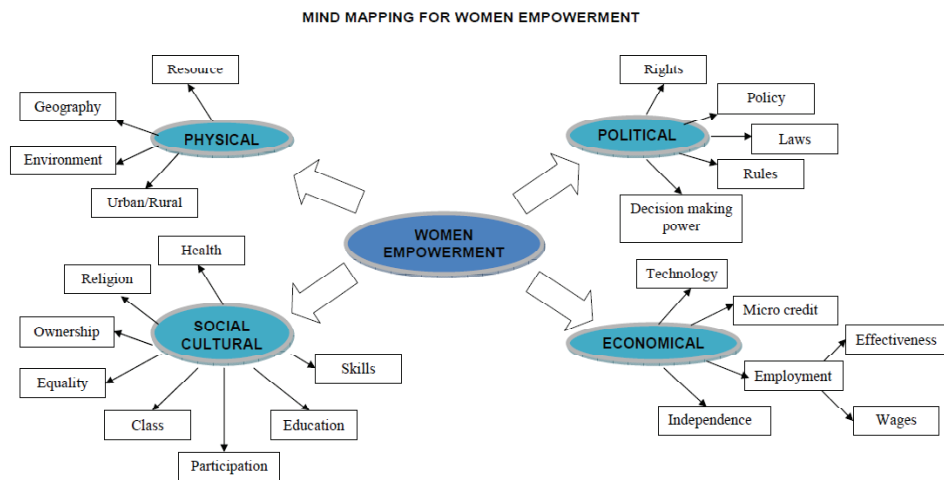
addition financial incentive will certainly bring out more and more qualified women professionals. Secondly, with some legislation and awareness women may be given right of entry to highly rewarding employment opportunities. A survey of the literature on women and tourism by *Equations* points out the following:

“In the food sector of the industry women are at the bottom of the hierarchy as restaurant helpers, cooks (not Chefs) and waitresses--all the lowest paid parts of the food sectors. Chefs in fancier restaurants where salaries and tips are substantial are more likely to be males.”

“In the travel sector, women have access and employment to seasonal, part-time or minimum wage jobs. Women tend to dominate small travel agencies and the majority are travel agents but men control the major sectors: airlines, railroads, hotel chains, car rental companies, travel magazines. Foreign control areas are also male dominated.”

Thus it is time that certain percentage of these highly paid jobs be reserved for the women who are really worthy of it.

Thirdly, there must be special entrepreneurship programmes that will encourage women be to become one. Budgets and financial allocations for development made by governments often do not have specific allocations for gender issues. Nor are they sensitively budgeted to the needs of women. In order for women's groups to advocate for change, not only do they have to move from the basic needs to a basic rights perspective but also move from being recipients of services to getting access and control over the resources needed to achieve equality. Indian government presented its first ever gender-sensitive budget in 2005 is a positive step in this direction. **Fourthly**, no matter whatever sops provided by the government and the industry it may not reach the needy if they are not



Source: Ampumuzza, C., van der Heijden, F., Hendriks, N., Klunder, R., Mazurek, J., van de Mosselaer, F., & Ong, E. (2008). S. Pan I. van Rump

**Fig. 1**

aware about it. Thus there is a need for a strong awareness programme so that women at the grass root level may take the benefit of the resources allocated for them. Though women contribution to the economy has considerably increased most of it is neither acknowledged nor accounted. Therefore a system must be devised to estimate women's contribution to tourism industry and based on that resources may be allocated to them. Proper review and reporting at particular intervals will ensure an all round welfare of the women in tourism industry.

Last and most importantly, there must be a change in the attitude of society towards women. The 21st century must become synonymous with the time the woman finally got her rightful place in society. And her status at home will largely determine her standing in the world. Respect for a woman, her needs and aspirations are essential because only then can she give her best to society. A happy woman will make a loving home and bring up sons and daughters who have a healthy outlook towards life and are not scared to denounce the evils afflicting every little step of our walk towards a peaceful existence. Thus, to begin with there must be democracy in the family. The husband and wife should work as a team with both partners having an equal say in decision-making. The woman must not be condemned to play the role of a maid to the man - whether it is father, brother husband, father-in-law, brother-in-law or son. Society needs to be rid of a lot of shortcomings that have only undermined the position of woman. Just as the practice of sati has been abolished, the world would be a far better place if people spent their time in constructive activities rather than collecting dowry for their daughters or marrying them off during childhood and leaving them to their "fate" or satisfying their lust by kidnapping, raping and dumping girls. In order to iron out the unevenness in society, the women must be educated and they should learn to assert their rights and shun the injustices heaped on them.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Possible actions that may really make a difference to the status of women in society, particularly in tourism can be four-fold. First, call for a study by the tourism ministry to systematically assess the impact of tourism on development, and particularly on women. Secondly, invite women to become active in the debate on trade in tourism. Thirdly, demand renegotiations with the captains of the industry with the intent to promote economic and social justice, gender equality and sustainable development. Fourthly, encourage the inclusion of gender representatives of civil society at every level and occasion at which the regulation of trade in tourism services and other goods is considered and negotiated, both nationally and internationally. All said and done, the real change will be when our society's psyche undergoes a transformation and both men and women meet mid-way rather than the girl always making all the adjustments.

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