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OPPORTUNITIES FOR STRENGTHENING GENDER EQUALITY THROUGH TOURISM

Kholmurodova Mokhzoda

Master degree student, Department of Tourism Management, Silk Road
International University of Tourism and Cultural Heritage, Samarkand, 141500,
Uzbekistan

E-mail: mohzodaxolmurodova1@gmail.com

ORCID ID: 0009-0009-8434-8832

Abstract:

Tourism is one of the fastest-growing sectors in the international economy and provides income and social change. (UNSWTO,2022) As a sector with a strong labour-related focus, tourism offers many job opportunities especially for women, but gender inequality persists in terms of income, leadership and access to decision-making opportunities. This study measured the success of tourism to increase gender equality, using Uzbekistan's past experience as well as current practices from around the world. The paper outlines the impact of women in tourism, the barriers that exist and the options available to remove those barriers. Overall it was concluded that tourism has the opportunity to become a strong catalyst for gender equality and social equity, if it is developed and managed in a sustainable and inclusive fashion.

Keywords: Tourism development; Gender equality; Women empowerment; Sustainable tourism; Uzbekistan.

Introduction:

Gender equality can be considered one of the greatest global challenges and is included among the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015) The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) stated that women represent over 50% of the global tourism workforce but still have limited access to equal pay and opportunities for leadership positions.(UNWTO,2022) Therefore, even though women in Uzbekistan take part in tourism via handicrafts, gastronomy, and guest houses (which they do receive income from, plus independence), their



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potential for moving up the career ladder or contributing to decisions is still limited. (UNDP Uzbekistan, 2021)

The significance of this research paper is to examine the manner in which tourism can make a difference for gender equality, both internationally as well as locally. This is important for Uzbekistan to consider because it is being positioned as a growing tourism market within Central Asia, but it also must address the gender issues presently within the industry to ensure their growth is inclusive. (World Bank, 2020)

Problem Statement:

While tourism has a supposed potential to empower women, the practical circumstances demonstrate inequalities. Women are usually funneled into informal, seasonal, low-paying jobs. The wage gap remains considerable, and management and leadership roles are still male-dominated. Furthermore, cultural traditions and stereotypes often prevent women from taking part in management and entrepreneurial roles. Therefore, the contradiction is the gap between potential in tourism, and the structural barriers that exist in women's efforts to utilize this potential.

Research Objectives:

The research aims to:

1. Examine the existing level of role and involvement of women in the tourism industry.
2. Identify the key barriers and challenges to achieving gender parity.
3. Investigate best practice examples for women's empowerment in tourism on an international level.
4. Provide evidenced-based policy recommendations for increasing women's involvement in the tourism development of Uzbekistan.

Methodology:

The analysis in this report is based on a mixed quantitative and qualitative mixed methods approach. The analysis began with a scan of existing academic literature to



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understand the links between tourism and gender equality, and utilized scholarly articles published through Scopus and Google Scholar. It also involved reviewing major international reports published by organizations such as UNWTO and UNDP, and national data relating to Uzbekistan's tourism statistics. The impact to women's participation in tourism was also examined using comparative analysis of international examples that could serve as successful models, the examples in the analysis included women in tourism empowerment through Spain, Thailand, and Morocco. (Baum, 2013) To contextualize this research, a selection were selected as case studies of local practice looking at women entrepreneur opportunities and challenges with tourism in Uzbekistan to expose theoretical research findings related to their practical considerations working in tourism, and allowed for better understanding of why gender equality was so ingrained in their tourism practices and not supported statutorily. The methodology thus had a theoretical and practical component to inform any future studies to consider looking at gender equality research in tourism. It recognizes that a mixed methods approach is a two way conversation of understanding both theory and practice.

Results and Discussion:

This study's findings show that women in Uzbekistan are becoming more involved in tourism but their participation is still small when compared to what is happening worldwide. The analysis found that women are primarily involved in small scale tourism enterprises such as handicrafts, gastronomy, and guesthouses. These small scale tourism enterprises provide the opportunity for women to achieve some financial independence and preserve some aspects of culture, but at the same time it also showcases the structural barriers women have due to lack access to finance, professional development, and represents women as decision makers. Compared to women's participation in tourism in some international contexts such as Spain's inclusive tourism initiatives and Thailand's community based tourism experiences, Uzbekistan still has a long way to go in implementing gender-sensitive policies in the tourism sector.

This discussion indicates that while the government has adopted a number of reforms on entrepreneurialism and rural support, these have not yet been aligned with



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principles of gender equality. Women in tourism often operate in culturally defined roles without formally-defined gender roles, or cultural expectations which limit their role as businesswomen, preventing them from growing their businesses beyond their immediate local context. In any case, the study indicates that empowering women through skill development, networks and capacity building are pivotal elements of achieving gender equity and competitiveness in the tourism sector. To facilitate an area of inclusive growth, it would be beneficial to examine the national tourism strategy vis-a-vis the UN Sustainable Development Goals, specifically, Goal 5 on gender equality.

In conclusion, as the findings, indicate that Uzbekistan has enormous potential to use the tourism sector as a critical engine for advancing gender equality, it will take consistent and robust outputs from policy planning and design to education and awareness. If Uzbekistan can learn and draw lessons from existing successful international models and pilfer from examples of how they have executed similar efforts in a local context, then it is possible that the country could create a tourism industry which is both equitable and sustainable.

Conclusion and Recommendation:

The analysis concludes that the tourism context in Uzbekistan presents excellent potentials for women's empowerment and gender equality, but the full potential of women's participation has not been fully realized. Women tend to be involved with small-scale businesses, such as handicrafts, local cuisine or family-run guesthouses, as these businesses provide income-generating opportunities while preserving cultural heritage. There have been many barriers to women expanding their business and career potential in the tourism context, with limited access to finance, limited professional training, and cultural barriers limiting their advancement into leadership and collaborative positions, and opportunities in larger-scale tourism activities. Women providing tourism is not new and contesting stereotypes and structuring women's social and economic empowerment in tourism is a beneficial outcome of reforms in regional governance and tourism development strategies, but these concepts are not fully integrated with gender equality, and gender mainstreaming is still underdeveloped for the tourism sector. For more sustained or



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impactful growth and development to occur in relation to women in the tourism sector, improvements will need to be made to the institutions supporting women in the tourism sector, mechanisms need to be established to enhance targeted programming and support, and there will need to be deeper social change related to women's place in the economy.

This research demonstrates that maximizing women's empowerment and inclusion in tourism can contribute to not only gender equality, but also sustainable development broadly for Uzbekistan. Tourism has the potential to serve as a social and economic empowerment tool for women, if the policy tools are gender inclusive, and coupled with increased opportunities for capacity building. If Uzbekistan aligns its national tourism strategies with international best practice and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, Uzbekistan can create a tourism sector that will succeed in achieving women's empowerment and gender equality.

In relation to these findings, a number of recommendations accompany a strengthening of the role of women in the tourism sector of Uzbekistan. First, it is essential to deliver training and education to develop the skills of women, promote digital knowledge, and stimulate women's ability to manage their own businesses. Second, gender-sensitive credit products and microfinance should be developed by financial institutions and government agencies to promote women entrepreneurs taking their businesses to the next level. Third, awareness-raising campaigns and community-based initiatives to challenge traditional gender norms, and families and communities to support women participating in tourism, should be implemented. Fourth, policies should support women having leadership roles in tourism (in agencies and organizations whether public or private) to ensure inclusive decision-making. Finally, Uzbekistan would benefit from learning from and adapting tried and tested successful international practices, including Spain's inclusive tourism programs and Thailand's community-based tourism.

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