

# Women at work: exploring the issues and challenges of women employees in travel and tourism

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## Abstract

**Objectives:** To explore the various facets of issues and challenges associated with the women workforce in tourism industry and provide structural suggestions.

**Methodology:** This work is descriptive in nature; the outcome which is derived from desk review process of various academic works are mostly scattered and provide some pragmatic dimensions. Thematic content analysis has been applied to bring out major findings.

**Findings:** Travel & Tourism (T&T) sector has been advocated for its labor intensiveness and gender parity. It is estimated that women constitute the major portion of the work force generated by tourism. However, there have been rising concerns of gender pay gap, poor representation at professional level and burden of unpaid work in the tourism industry. Structural measures must be taken at all levels of organization to make sure equitable distribution of social and economic benefits.

**Application:** The findings of this study can act as a checklist for policy makers while designing development measures for women employees in tourism industry.

**Keywords:** Tourism, Gender, Equity, Workforce Management, Women Empowerment

## 1. Prologue

Globally, gender equity has become the buzz word of development. With rising gender inequality resulting in stunted growth and greater dependence, it has become an established fact that if the world has to grow at a steady and sustainable pace, it is inevitable that woman must join the workforce and opportunities must be created in this regard [1]. The same can be verified by the fact that United Nations has embraced gender equality as its 3<sup>rd</sup> goal of Millennium Development Goals [2] and 5<sup>th</sup> goal of Sustainable Development Goals. The goal outlines a list of functions that need to be carried on to achieve gender equality. One such function is to “Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life” [1]. The tourism industry is experiencing exponential growth, hence getting the tag of one of the *sunrise industries* in the world [3]. T&T accounted for US\$7.6 trillion (equivalent to 10.2% of global GDP) and 292 million jobs which are estimated to be 1 in 10 jobs generated across the global economy [4]. Consequently the tourism industry has been advocated throughout academics and industry for its labor intensiveness [5] an industry that reduces gender gaps [6]. As per estimation by International Labor Organization [7], of all the jobs generated through tourism directly or indirectly, women account for 60-70% in total.

However, this does not guarantee gender empowered the growth of tourism sector. Rather, there have been rising concerns about gender pay gap, poor representation at the professional level and burden of unpaid work in the tourism industry. It has been argued that even after three decades of research, gender has been poorly reflected in the tourism literature and that there is a shortage of feminist ideas, publications, and leaders in the tourism development discourse [8]. The current work is an attempt to bridge the existing gaps in the literature.

## 2. Objectives of the study

The study revolves around three broad objectives: The first objective is to provide the readers a basic understanding of the position of women in the tourism industry. Then the work tries to define the issues and challenges faced by the women workers in the tourism industry. This serves as the second objective following which the paper provides few suggestive mechanisms by which tourism industry can contribute more towards achieving gender equity.

## 3. Methodology adopted

This work is designed as a conceptual paper that takes its cues from the desk review of both online and offline materials. Various articles in reputed journals were first searched through Science Direct, EBSCO, JSTOR and Google scholar online resources. Tourism, Women Empowerment, and Gender were used as the keywords to extract the resources. Further, many websites of various government and non-government agencies were accessed to trace out any policy measures related to this topic. Offline resources like books, notes and newspaper cuttings were collected and finally were assimilated to draw the logical structure of the paper. The thematic content analysis was applied to derive particular information from vast data.

## 4. Women in tourism industry

While gender means both men and women equally, most of the work in tourism development has been done in connection with women empowerment [9]. Tourism is considered high in solving problems which are mostly faced by women and hence it was quoted as the *“Vehicle for gender equality and women empowerment”* [10]. Works conducted [11] argues that tourism industry involves jobs that mostly require human interactions and thus as women are known to be good at human skills, they are expected to perform better at duties assigned in the tourism industry.

Tourism involves activities like guiding, providing accommodation and food which are mostly carried out by women as daily routines. Hence, women are considered better while performing these activities [12]. Also, tourism in most parts of the world is carried out as part-time activity. Because of this nature of the job, women can perform tourism-related activities in their spare time after finishing of the house chores. It is argued that women are more connected with nature than men given their constant interaction with nature while collecting food, fodder and taking care of the house premises [13]. Thus, women are more compassionate towards nature than men. That is why most of the nature-based tourism like ecotourism, agro tourism, and rural tourism can be better handled by women [14]. In developing countries where women face a lot of inequality and hardship, tourism has provided a ray of hope by empowering them economically, socially and politically [15]. Additionally, tourism creates a lot of value chains that increase the opportunities for women to achieve both formal and informal employment. Tourism also provides women the power to voice the opinion and occupy various positions (Table 1) which is higher than any other sector [16].

Further, tourism facilitates women's entrepreneurship by ensuring easy access to credit, property, land as well as providing appropriate training and resources to support women's enterprises. Though data on education pertaining to tourism development are scarce, it has been observed that a number of girls and women graduating in tourism discipline are on the rise and many unpaid works performed by women is being recognized through tourism. In [17] mentions the different types of job that are acquired by women working in the mass tourism industry as well as foreign-owned alternative tourism ventures. However, the nature of employment in tourism industry is often gendered which often results in reinforcing the low-status in society and to an extent making it magnified [18]. A study [17], demonstrates that tourism business is taking full advantage of the customary conviction, especially in reference to segregation based on sex, housewifization of work, low education levels, low wages, and double workday. However, family financial decision making, social cooperation, ownership of the business, levels of independence and employment by all accounts are offering

chances to challenge the standards set. Many studies have shown that women occupy the “Female” positions; men overwhelming occupy the highest positions within mass tourism [19, 18].

*Table 1. Job profiles mostly held by women across various types of tourism*

<b>Mass tourism</b>	<b>Foreign-Owned Alternative tourism</b>
Accountant	Accountants (receivables)
Bartender	Aestheticians/ Spa Manager
Director of sales	Cook
Executive Housekeeper	Front Desk/ Concierge
Food and Beverage manager	Gift Shop Attendee
Front Desk Clerk	Office Work and Housekeeping
Front Office Manager	Housekeeping
Gift shop Attendee	Laundry
Housekeeper	Receptionist
Payroll Clerk	Waitress
Receptionist	Waitress, Bartender, Reservations
Reservations	Worker at Butterfly Farm
Sales and Marketing Representative	
Waitress	

Source [17]

## 5. Issues involved

Though women perform a fair share of work in the tourism sector, there are many issues that need to be focused on while tourism development takes place. Some of the issues have been outlined below;

1. The success of women in tourism industry often goes unnoticed not because of lack of talent or skills, but because of lack of opportunities.
2. The support and motivation provided by family and friends to women play a major role in boosting confidence and thus to succeed in tourism business.
3. Women are often made to do low paid, precarious, low status jobs in tourism because of gender stereotyping and male domination which results in women mostly doing cooking, cleaning or hospitality jobs.
4. Gender equity often enhances the quality of tourism experience at the destination. This leads to better profitability and sustainable growth.
5. Women are often misconceived to be better at clerical level and are less likely to reach professional-level than men in tourism employment, for which their average take-home pay is lower than men's.
6. Even though the representation of women in the ministerial level is high in comparison to any other sector there is still a lot to be achieved gender equity.
7. In tourism based family businesses, a large amount of unpaid work is being carried out by women and never gets noticed.
8. Women's contribution to community development must be thoroughly recognized.
9. There have been many instances where gender pay gap has been noticed in tourism industry. This discrimination must be abolished.
10. Cases of sexual harassment, asking for sexual or professional favors from women workers are on the rise in tourism industry.
11. Technology can play a great role in reducing gender disparity.
12. Many startups have been developed for tourism business which is run by women.
13. Policy makers and various NGOs are now giving specific focus for gender empowerment function and feminist movements are increasing to support it.
14. Feminization of poverty is declining as women are more becoming independent through jobs generated by tourism.

## 6. Challenges faced

In order to grow sustainably, tourism industry must ensure equal participation of women in the tourism development process. However, many challenges obstruct the way for women as they march forward. Some of those challenges are highlighted below:

1. Women literacy stands as one of the biggest challenges in ensuring women empowerment. Many women don't get to finish their education necessary for acquiring jobs as they have to take care of the family or because they get married.
2. Gender stereotypes are still common in developing countries where women are thought not fit for many jobs.
3. Pay gaps are a common phenomenon where women are paid less for the same post of job or for the same work performed than men. This stands as a great obstacle in the path of development.
4. Lack of support by male counterparts is one of the major factors affecting the success of women in tourism business.
5. Orthodox and traditional mentality e.g. women in the house should not interact with tourists and strangers are very common. Eliminating such misconceptions will be a great challenge for policymakers.
6. Religion-based problems for women e.g. considering a woman impure while she is having her periods and not allowing to work during those days needs due consideration.

## 7. Suggestions

For ensuring equal participation of women in the tourism industry many structural changes must take place. Some of the suggestive mechanisms have been cited below:

1. Undertake reforms to provide women equal rights to economic resources like loans, credits, bank services etc.
2. Organize awareness camps to enhance gender sensitivity and women empowerment.
3. Providing a better work place for women and ensuring their safety and security in the workplace by Eliminate all forms of violence against all women.
4. Taking measures to eliminate any form of discrimination against women.
5. Taking actions to recognize and value the unpaid works performed by a female employee in the workplace and provide remuneration or rewards.
6. Motivation and support of the friends and family must be extended for women workers in tourism industry.
7. Necessary actions must be taken to break the glass ceiling effect.
8. Extending the maternity leave period can be a good start to motivate better participation of women in workplace.
9. Having a gender-based auditing system in place can make the women employees in tourism know and show their worth to the organizations.
10. Usage of technology and upgraded communication methods for empowering women with information.
11. Adopting and strengthening of policies as well as enforceable legislations for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment must be a clause in every the tourism organization.

## 8. Epilogue

The paper argues that women have a better participation and representation in tourism industry than any other sector. However, it doesn't mean that nothing needs to be done for women employees in tourism sector. There are many gray areas that need to be addressed for empowering women in tourism industry that have been discussed in the issues and challenges sections of the paper. Finally, the suggestive measures must be taken to ensure not only gender equity but also the sustainable growth of the sector.

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