



Rural Women and their Roles in Tourism

Zahra Arzjani^{1*} and Vida Rahiminezhad²

¹Department of Literature and Human Science, Islamic Azad University, Branch of Tehran Central, Tehran, Iran

²Research Institute for Family, Tehran, Iran

Article History

Manuscript No. 99

Received in 22nd December, 2010

Received in revised form 1st February, 2011

Accepted in final form 22nd February, 2011

Correspondence to

*E-mail: zarzjani@yahoo.com

Keywords

Tourism, rural areas, women, sustainability

Abstract

Rural development optimizes the poor conditions of villagers. It helps villagers to achieve self-sufficiency which is a part of entrepreneurial plan. One of the entrepreneurial aims is to achieve rural sustainability. For rural sustainability, it is necessary to pay attention to tourism, handicrafts and domestic productions that could reduce rural immigration to cities. Nowadays, tourism industry is growing, but the disappointment is that women in rural areas throughout the Iran are still leading a life of dependency that does not allow them to achieve positive economic and social status. This article examines the situation of rural women in tourism in Iran. The results show that rural tourism can be used as a tool to bring socio-economic development of the rural people in developing countries. However, if rural tourism is to be successful, the governments of developing regions must actively facilitate and encourage the expansion of women's role in a systematic manner with institutional support.

© 2011 PP House. All rights reserved

1. Introduction

In 1950, the top 15 destinations of the world absorbed 88% of international arrivals. In 1970, this proportion dropped to 75% and even further to 57% in 2005, reflecting the emergence of new destinations, many of them are found in developing countries (Equations, 2007). The paper explores what this growth has meant for women; particularly for women in destinations of the globe. To what extent they have benefited from this phenomenon? Has tourism opened doors for women? Has its growth contributed to women's empowerment? Answering these questions the paper examines the status of women and their leadership in tourism, the nature of women's employment in tourism, women in tourism's informal sector, the effect of depletion of natural resources on women and the challenges to women's rights as stakeholders in all aspects of tourism development.

2. The Tourism Industry

Consistent growth and increasing diversification has contributed to the global tourism industry the reputation of being one of the fastest growing economic sectors worldwide. United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) reports that international tourism is very much due to the rise of the number of international arrivals which grew from 25 million in 1950 to 842 million in 2006 representing a 4.6% annual growth

rate. The income generated by these arrivals surpassing the growth rate of the world economy, grew at a rate of 11.2% during the same period, reaching around US\$ 735 billion in 2006 (UNDP, 2007).

The UNWTO forecasts that international arrivals are expected to reach nearly 1.6 billion by the year 2020. Of these, 1.2 billion will be intraregional and 378 million will be long-haul travelers. Continuing world prosperity has clearly been the main driver behind this boon. Asia and the Pacific stand out as the motors of international tourism expansion which continues to move notwithstanding man-made and natural crisis (UNDP, 2007). Emerging markets and developing economies especially in Asia, tourism promotion by national governments especially in developing regions, have increased investment in infrastructure, marketing and advertising, development of domestic markets, liberalization of air transport, growing intra-regional cooperation for which a growing number of public-private partnerships are key factors in this expansion of the tourism business. Under the above circumstances, important questions that come in one's mind are:

What does this growth mean for women—particularly for women in destinations of the global south?

To what extent they have benefited from this phenomenon?

Has tourism opened doors for women? Has this growth contributed to women's empowerment?



3. Frameworks for Women's Empowerment

The advancement of women and the achievement of equality between women and men is a matter of human rights and a condition for social justice. These are essential to build a sustainable, just, secured and developed society. For decades now, through vibrant movements and political struggles, women have challenged existing gender relations and patriarchal systems to reframe the development dialogue. They have placed issues of violence, race, caste and other forms of discrimination that hit women the hardest; and the need for equality and human rights of women including social, economic, political, legal, sexual and reproductive rights at the center-stage of this struggle. Global processes from Rio, Copenhagen, Vienna, Cairo and Beijing to Durban, particularly the CEDAW (Convention for Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women), the UN Fourth World Conference on Women and its subsequent Beijing Platform for Action, have set out critical concerns and strategic action points. The battle for equality, to challenge the status quo, to demand action on women's key concerns, to mobilize civil society in both the global north and south, and to push for a global reordering of the world's resources continues with the same intensity but leaving one with little sense of progress on substantive issues. There has been enormous frustration at the lack of government commitment and accountability to development goals in general and gender equality commitments in particular.

So, what is the role that tourism has played and can play in this important struggle towards equity and empowerment of women? In 1996, Vivian Kinnaird and Derek Hall in 'Understanding tourism processes: a gender aware framework' invite us to understand tourism processes from a framework of social differentiation. Gender is one key component. Kinnaird and Hall argue that tourism involves processes which are constructed out of complex and varied social realities and relations that are often hierarchical and usually unequal. The division of labor, the social constructions of 'landscape' (both natural and human influenced how societies construct the cultural 'other'), and the realities of experiences of tourist and host all show that in examining the issues of relationships differences and inequalities exist. They went further to argue that tourism's identification as an industry based on the economic, social and political power relations between nations or groups of people represents the extension of the politics of gender relations. Policies and budgets have the potential both to perpetuate gender bias and blindness, and to transform them. Gender disaggregated data show that gender-sensitive policies and indicators are essential in building up a picture of the nature and extent of gender inequality. We need to understand the way the institutions with their gender rules work. We need

also to develop the political will, processes and tools to challenge and change them. Gender audits and gender budgeting are tools that could be employed meaningfully, particularly at community levels. These in turn will impact women's political participation and decision making on the forms, impacts, models and pace of tourism in their communities. It is high time that tourism recognizes women's agency and hears their voices in its development (Mashomi, 2010).

4. Rural Tourism and Rural Women

The issues of rural tourism, women and tourism, and rural women and rural tourism are new research areas which lack a deep theoretical background. According to Page and Getz (1997), rural tourism as a whole has continued to suffer from neglect among tourism researchers, leaving the available literature very limited. In the same way, in contrast to the rich literature on women and development as a whole, the international English literature on the role of women and tourism is limited as acknowledged by Apostolopoulos et al. (2001). Page and Getz (1997) made clear that the literature on rural tourism is very sparse and conceptual models and theories are also lacking: 'Rural tourism is often being subsumed under or confused with recreation and leisure activities since many studies assume that rural tourism equates with simple concepts such as 'the countryside'. The neglect of tourism as a rural business activity has also been compounded by the absence of any theoretical research published in mainstream tourism journals. As a result, much of the research on rural tourism has, with a number of exceptions, failed to contribute to a growing awareness of its role, value and significance in the wider development of tourism studies and its importance as a mainstay of many rural economies' (Bharti and Malcolm, 2004).

This means that there is a lack of theory and models placing rural tourism in the wider conceptual framework regarding the position of women in rural societies. Nonetheless, empirical research regarding rural tourism has been accomplished. To understand the impact of rural tourism as an industry on the position of rural women we need to consider whether it can serve as a development agent in terms of reducing rural poverty, uplifting the status of rural women by adding to or becoming more important than their agriculture-related skills, and/or promoting many other changes that are urgently needed for upliftment of rural women (Motiee Langrudi, 2005).

5. Rural Tourism in Developing Countries

5.1. China

The strength of rural women in China, their role in caring the family, raising poultry and livestock, weaving, etc. remain behind the scenes. Men mostly make decisions relating to



daily life and rarely consult their female partners on business matters.

Rural women taking part in collective labor have realized their role as wage earners, as well as their importance in production, thus broadening their potential. Women have also moved closer to having equal roles in the family, representing 41% of the rural labor force in agriculture. Their participation in crop production has increased the family's income, enabling them to keep up with modern-day needs.

They have emerged as major contributors to the impressive growth of the nation, rural and national economies, tourism, and in the process have gained recognition as equals in society. Another factor has given women access to land and the encouragement to join the agricultural labor force. Rural women's enormous productive potential really began to be tapped with the incentives and opportunities created in the 1980s by the Household Responsibility System (HRS), the opening up of a market economy, the growth of 'courtyard economies', and the promotion of rural enterprises and tourism.

5.2. India

Women's participation in tourism is more prevalent in other countries of Asia than in India, largely because of their traditional social practices. Thus, the literature regarding Indian women's tourism participation is very scanty and consequently this study lacks a wide theoretical background. Apostolopoulos et al. (2001) confirmed that women, especially in developing regions, are likely to experience tourism differently due to their positions in their respective socio-cultural and socio-economic environments. They argue that women are exploited by global capitalism's patriarchal drive and also that tourism producers and consumers alike live in a gendered world where specific gendered contexts cause different tourism impact.

It has acknowledged that as in all other forms of employment in India, access to tourism-related employment is gender based. Men tend to predominate in the formal sector of tourism in India. Women contribute just a small percentage (2.98%) of employment in tourism. The question is how to empower women and bring them to equality with men in the mainstream. Some achievements have been made recently. The National Policy for the Empowerment of Women declared that India must be a country that grants equality to women and also empowers the state to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favor of women (Bailancho, 1987). The goal of this policy is to bring about the advancement, development and empowerment of women by focusing on the access of women to the economy, particularly those belonging to weaker sections in the rural areas and in the informal, unorganized sectors.

6. Rural Women and Tourism in Iran

The literature regarding Iranian women's tourism participation is very scant and consequently this study lacks a wide theoretical background.

The census shows that just 16.7% of ten-year-old and older women in the whole country are financially active in spring 2009. In agriculture sector, this percentage is 5.8, it is 34.4 in industry sector, and in service sector it is 59.8. On the contrary, in rural area 21.5% of women are financially active; 57.9% in agriculture sector, 23.9% in industry sector, and 18.2% in service sector.

It is a question that whether tourism enhances or diminishes women's status and whether it has different consequences for social and domestic lives of women compared to those of men. Consequently, there are visible differences in how women and men are involved in the business of tourism. Just as particular stereotypes and hierarchical shape tourism in those societies where modernization and global capitalism converge with religion, culture and history, gender realities influence tourism, marketing, travelers and the actions of the host community (Moradi, 2009).

However, in order to understand the situation of women in tourism of Iran, we must consider the following factors:

- a. Low female literacy levels (in spite of improvement in female literacy rates during the last decades, substantial gender gaps still exist).
- b. Women's contribution to production/reproduction that is not adequately recognized.
- c. Non-recognition of women's work.
- d. Lack or poor levels of skill/training for women workers.
- e. Poor health conditions and poverty (inequality, disempowerment, lack of opportunity and poor access in different spheres).
- f. Absence of social security measures for women workers and unequal wages.
- g. Poor access to resources/land/property.

7. Challenges of Rural Tourism in Iran

The following items are challenges of rural tourism and challenges of rural women's roles in Iran as well:

7.1. Lack of managerial skills

A problem shared by most Asian countries is the lack of managerial skills among farmers involved in tourism projects. Lack of skills is also a problem among the local government staff responsible for planning and regulation of tourism. Most have little knowledge or experience of tourism development. This makes it difficult for them to select suitable projects for development permits, or assess the impact of these projects on rural areas (Papoli Yazdi, 2008).



7.2. Marketing

Most rural tourism facilities tend to be small and widely scattered. This makes it difficult to market them to potential visitors, and makes it almost impossible for them to cater for the mass tourist industry.

7.3. Infrastructure

Many rural areas of outstanding natural beauty have a poor road or rail network, and are difficult to reach. In some densely populated countries, road access may be made difficult by crowding. In others, roads are poor so that travel is slow. City dwellers are unwilling to spend their precious free time visiting the countryside if it takes too long to get there.

7.4. Limited tourism season

Even more than cities, rural areas receive most of their tourists during the height of the season. This limits the number of days in which tourist accommodation and other facilities are used, and reduces the return on investment.

7.5. Poor return on investment

Returns on capital invested in rural tourism tend to be fairly low. They are nearly always lower than the returns from other kinds of commercial enterprises. In general, small-scale farmers are well advised not to invest too heavily in new buildings or expensive facilities. It is difficult for them to make a profit if they are burdened by heavy interest payments. Cheap credit and other financial help from governments can make a big difference in the profitability of a tourism farm.

7.6. Lack of information about the need of visitors

Farmers who provide accommodation for tourists, especially visitors from overseas, are dealing with people who have a different life style from their own, and an unfamiliar set of preferences and values. Success in rural tourism is based on return visits, and word of mouth recommendations. Farmers need information about their visitors, including feedback, so they can adapt to the wishes of their visitors. A good questionnaire, or some other way of telling farmers what their customers liked and what they did not like, will help them develop a successful enterprise (Saidi, 2000).

8. Conclusion

Women play a major role in the rural tourism though it is often scarcely appreciated compared to that of men. Despite having an important place in rural labor, they are hardly ever acknowledged as producers or held responsible for the management of natural resources through their productive work.

It is also a fact that land and other resources in rural areas, which are the primary sources of food in Iran, are being privatized and commercialized for profit. Thus rural women have a step

further to take: they not only have to struggle against cultural and political discrimination, but also against an economic system that renders them with less property and less opportunity, even as they are given a greater role in society through their struggles.

There is a need to empower women in multi-dimensional areas regarding priorities of welfare, access to informational technology, increase political and social awareness, participation in decision making processes and self-development. Considering the above, following suggestions are recommended:

- ✓ To make active participation of women in NGOs.
- ✓ To create job opportunities and establishing new entrepreneurial program.
- ✓ To support women by government socially and financially.
- ✓ To establish different multi-purpose networks to promote harmony among NGOs and empower them as well.
- ✓ To provide appropriate education to enrich women's creativity towards sustainable tourism.
- ✓ To provide optimal conditions for rural women to increase their participation in expansion of handicraft.
- ✓ To establish a model of productive factory in different rural areas.

9. References

- Apostrolopoulos, Y., Sonmez, S., Dallen, J., 2001. Women as Producers and Consumers of Tourism in Developing Regions. Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., Bangalore, 235-237.
- Bailancho Saad, 1987. Tourism—its Effects on Women in Goa: a Report to the People', Goa, India.
- Bharti, A., Malcolm, C., 2004. Women's role in Indian rural tourism: towards a social-infrastructure model for rural development. Asia Pacific Studies, 13-15.
- Mashomi, M., 2010. Approach in Tourism Development Planning. Tehran Publishing Co., Tehran, 70-80.
- Moradi, G., 2009. The role of women in rural development. Journal of Talesh 13, 66.
- Motiee Langrudi, H. M.L., 2005. Iran Economic Geography (Industry). Mashhad University Jihad Publications, Mashhad, Iran.
- Page, S.J., Getz, D., 1997. The Business of Rural Tourism: International Perspective. International Thomson Business Press, London.
- Papoli Yazdi, M.H., 2008. Rural Development Theories. Mashhad University Jihad Publications, Mashhad, Iran, 55, 66, 78.
- UNDP, 2007. Millennium Development Goals. <http://data.undp.org/in/factsheets/hd-rl/may07/ETP.pdf>.