Women empowerment in tourism: progressing the research agenda

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Abstract

Purpose — This review paper aims to contribute to the growing literature on women empowerment in tourism by identifying knowledge gaps that may offer opportunities for further research.

Design/methodology/approach — A critical review of the literature on women empowerment in tourism was conducted.

Findings — The review reveals four knowledge gaps in relation to methodology, geographical location, study context and theoretical framework adopted. Pertinent research includes mostly qualitative research with a focus on non-Western geographical locations. Studies examined women empowerment in relation to alternative tourism forms with several not adopting a theoretical framework. Based on these gaps, suggestions for further research are made.

Research limitations/implications — Although this paper does not aim at providing an exhaustive review of the gender literature, it highlights the narrow focus placed on women empowerment in tourism and suggests avenues for further research.

Originality/value — Women empowerment has only recently begun to attract attention in tourism. This review paper aims to contribute to the growing literature on women empowerment in tourism, identifying the breake of knowledge that may offer opportunities for further research.

Keywords Women empowerment, Tourism, Gender equality, SDGs

Paper type Literature review

Resumen

Objetivo: El objetivo de este trabajo de revisión es contribuir a las crecientes publicaciones sobre el empoderamiento de la mujer en el turismo, identificando la brecha de conocimiento que puede ofrecer oportunidades para futuros estudios.

Diseño/metodología/entfoque: Se llevó a cabo una revisión crítica de la bibliografía sobre el empoderamiento de la mujer en el turismo.
Introduction

*a fortiori* gender is inextricably linked to tourism. Women play an active role in tourism either as consumers (tourists) or producers (employees) of tourism products. Women represent an important part of the tourist demand with service providers increasingly adjusting their product offering to female tourist segments (*Khan et al.*, 2019). Women make up approximately 54% of the tourism workforce (*World Bank*, 2019), as the industry offers job opportunities, flexible working schedules and entrepreneurial prospects (*McGehee et al.*, 2007). The importance of tourism to women seems to be heightened in developing nations or in minority groups like refugees (*Farmaki and Christou*, 2019).

However, women in tourism continue to experience economic and social, as they often find themselves trapped in gendered roles promoted by dominant stereotypes (*Arroyo et al.*, 2019). For example, women in tourism tend to work in low-skilled and low-paid positions that are regarded as female roles (e.g. cooking, cleaning), while there are less women in leadership and management positions (*Carvalho et al.*, 2018). Evidence indicates that women receive lower salaries than men for the same type of job (*World Bank*, 2019) and are less likely to receive funding for entrepreneurship (*UNWTO*, 2017). Women are also victimised within tourism especially in poor developing destinations, as they often fall victims of harassment and prostitution (*Brooks and Heaslip*, 2019).

In this context, gender equality has been acknowledged by inter-governmental organisations as important for sustainable development (*Moreno-Alarcon*, 2017). Gender equality has been included as a sustainable development goal (SDG) in the United Nation’s (UN) Agenda 2030, whereas the European Union has embedded gender equality in all of its policies (*Fagan and Rubery*, 2018). Gender equality is achieved through women empowerment (*Grown et al.*, 2005), which the European Institute for Gender Equality (2023) defines as the “process by which women gain power and control over their own lives and acquire the ability to make strategic choices”. Women empowerment has only begun to receive academic attention in tourism despite the growing number of tourism studies on gender (*Nguyen*, 2022).

Gender and tourism studies provide valuable insights as they highlight tourism as a field of employment and entrepreneurship for women (*Duffy et al.*, 2015) as well as a female leisure activity (*Pung et al.*, 2022) that contributes to gender equality. Nonetheless, these studies look at female traveller perspectives and/or female tourism employees’ and entrepreneurs’ experiences, overlooking the process of women empowerment. Extant literature implies that women are empowered through tourism employment or travel but does not specifically focus on women empowerment dimensions, conditions or processes. This omission is surprising considering that women empowerment is a prerequisite for gender equality.

This paper is the first review on women empowerment in tourism and aims to identify knowledge gaps that may offer opportunities for further research, advancing the gender...
and tourism research domain beyond sex tourism and employment, which seem to dominate the literature (Jeffrey, 2019). Although there are past reviews on gender in tourism, they are limited in at least three aspects. Firstly, gender and tourism reviews have overlooked the topic of women empowerment. Women empowerment is the process required for minimising gender inequalities; however, extant literature has not yet paid attention on the conditions of women empowerment and instead focused on discussing tourism as a means to empower women workers and travellers (Nguyen, 2022). Secondly, studies tend to focus on specific gender-related themes like entrepreneurship (Figueroa-Domecq et al., 2020), management (Mooney, 2020) and gendered roles of hosts and guests (Jeffrey, 2019) or investigate gender equality in specific geographical locations (Vizcaino-Suárez and Díaz-Carrión, 2019). The specificities of women empowerment are not discussed with literature merely making inferences that tourism entrepreneurship, employment or travel may empower women. Thirdly, tourism and gender studies seem to have adopted either a bibliometric analysis or a systematic review method (Je et al., 2022) leading to a dominance of quantifiable research themes that lack critical assessment. This paper adopts a critical approach in reviewing women empowerment in tourism research to identify knowledge gaps and develop a research agenda by reflecting back to women empowerment theorising.

Women empowerment conceptualisation

Empowerment represents a process through which individuals, organisations and societies gain control over their lives (Rappaport, 1987). Wallerstein (1992) posited that empowerment is a social process that promotes the participation of people, organisations and communities in the achievement of individual and collective goals and contributes to political effectiveness, improved quality of life and social justice. Through empowerment, entities can recognise the dynamics of power in their lives, develop skills to assume control over their lives, exercise control without infringing the rights of others and support the empowerment of others in society (McWhirter, 1991). As Rappaport (1987) argued, it is easier to understand the absence of empowerment rather than its practical application as it was studied in a variety of disciplines and has been conceptualised varyingly. Bailey (1992) added that the interpretation of empowerment relies on the context in which it is implemented as well as the group seeking to be empowered.

The importance of empowerment was noted by feminist movements that called for greater political and social rights for women. Feminist theory considers the empowerment of women the beginning of the global social change that is necessary to reduce gender inequality (Grogan, 1992). The inferior status of women stems from societal inequality with their personal status being influenced by political, economic and social power relations; thereby, feminist theory proposes that women should gain equal access to all forms of power. Several definitions have been attributed to women empowerment, with the majority focusing on independence, freedom of choice and achievement of control and power. Page and Czuba (1999) defined women empowerment as the process through which women are expected to achieve power with the aim of gaining free will, participation and action in society. Sahay (1998) explained women empowerment as an active multidimensional process that helps women use their identity and develop power in all aspects of their life. Kabeer (1999) considered women empowerment as women’s autonomy, relative access to resources and control over the power of decision-making.

A reading of relevant definitions highlights three significant characteristics of women empowerment. Firstly, women empowerment is multifaceted comprising of:

- economic empowerment;
- social empowerment;
- political empowerment;
- psychological empowerment; and
- educational empowerment (Mandal, 2013).

These forms of empowerment are interdependent, as one enables the achievement of the other and relate to the interconnected social aspects of women's identities known as "positionality", which act as markers of relational positions (Alcoff, 1988). Empowerment requires a consideration of the many spheres of women’s life as well as of sociocultural (i.e. race) and gender framings. For instance, women of specific race or ethnicities may face greater oppression and constraints. Here, intersectional feminism becomes relevant as it acknowledges that women face multiple forms of oppression that overlap in various aspects of their life and empowerment needs to address these holistically.

Secondly, women empowerment is understood to represent a process consisting of three interrelated dimensions, namely, resources, agency and achievements (Kabeer, 1999). Resources can be material (e.g. financial capital), social (e.g. social network) and personal (e.g. skills, creativity) and create the conditions under which choices are made by women. Agency refers to the ability of women to define their goals and act upon them via negotiation, resistance, analysis and reflection. Achievements are the desired results of the choices and goals of women that can be attained either through individual or collective action. While initial structural analyses of empowerment placed emphasis on material constraints that contribute to disempowerment, post-structural social theory acknowledges the connections between sociocultural relations and the respective material and symbolic representations of power (Aitchison, 2005). Power relations are inherently rooted in and result from the structures of modern society where exclusion of societal groups (i.e. women) and inequality are present (Aitchison, 2005).

Thirdly, conceptualisations of women empowerment identify power as a prerequisite, as disempowered women need to increase their power in various areas compared to men. In doing so, the process of women empowerment needs to respond to the causes of disempowerment and ensure it allows women access to resources and abilities that will increase their power individually and collectively (Mayoux, 2003) through various power dimensions like "power over", "power to", "power with" and "power within" as conceptualised by Lukes (2005). According to Rowlands (1997), the "power over" dimension refers to the ability to influence and enforce changes in resources and restrictions, "power to" deals with the organisation and change of existing hierarchies for greater accessibility and personal capability, "power with" refers to the increase of power through collective action to change stereotypes and maximise solidarity, while "power within" is more concerned with the increase of personal consciousness and desire for change. In poststructuralism, and based on Foucault's theorising, power is not fixed. Rather, it is fluid and multifaceted, exercised in daily structures and discourses and related to identity, social relations and political outcomes (Campbell, 2013), as manifested through gendered subjectivities.

Women empowerment and tourism

The United Nations (2011) recognised tourism as an important industry in empowering women politically, economically and socially. Inter-governmental organisations and international bodies have directed efforts to develop and implement gender-sensitive policies that safeguard women in the tourism workforce, provide training and opportunities to women to develop entrepreneurial activities and ensure gender equality at the corporate level. Tourism literature on gender issues began to grow in the last two decades (Jeffrey, 2019) following calls for greater gender equality in tourism (Alarcón and Cole, 2019). In this context, borrowing from other disciplines, Aghazamani and Hunt (2017, p. 335) define empowerment as “a multidimensional, context-dependent and dynamic process that
provides humans, individually and collectively, with greater agency, freedom and capacity to improve their quality of life as a function of engagement with the phenomenon of tourism”.

Much of the focus of tourism gender studies has been on specific thematic areas and perspectives that largely explore whether travel or tourism employment can contribute to gender equality (Nguyen, 2022). The number of tourism studies that focus specifically on women empowerment is less, which is surprising considering that gender equality is achieved through the empowerment of women. Echoing poststructuralism theory, Cole (2018) argued that the empowerment of women is not enough for gender equality, as a transformation of the society in which women live is needed to address any structural inequalities. The author comments on how empowerment was supposed to transform gender inequality but has come to be related to income provision, missing on the opportunity to address the causes of women disempowerment related to the lack of resources and agency stemming from gender discrimination in patriarchal societies. In this context, Cole (2018) interprets empowerment with the three As framework: agency (the capacity to initiate action), autonomy (the ability to make choices) and authority (to be respected and listened to) which to be gained require a process of change.

We argue that women empowerment research should be distinguished from gender studies and analysed distinctively to better understand its determinants, facilitators and barriers that constitute not only the material constraints to empowerment but also the sociocultural relations that manifest representations of power in modern society (Aitchison, 2005). While there are review papers that focus on gender in tourism (e.g. Figueroa-Domecq, 2020; Je et al., 2022; Jeffrey, 2019; Mooney, 2020), there is no review on women empowerment in tourism. This paper aims to address this gap and attempts to critically review studies on women empowerment in tourism to identify knowledge gaps and develop a research agenda.

Methodology

Contrary to past reviews on gender in tourism that adopted a quantified method (i.e. systematic review), this paper adopts a critical approach. A critical review involves the examination of relevant literature through a reflection of its content, concept interpretation and findings. This is not a reductionist approach; rather, the aim is to evaluate the research on the topic through a critical appraisal approach and identify the gaps in knowledge that future research may address. As Coles et al. (2013, p. 127) stated, “the content of a review is the function of the search process and the contributions it reveals”. Google Scholar was chosen as the database for searching relevant research, as it does not limit the search to top-ranking journals but incorporates articles from a variety of journals from different disciplines (Jeffrey, 2019). Our search was limited only to English publications. To identify potential articles, the keywords “women”, “empowerment” and “tourism” were used as search terms. Other related terms such as “gender equality”, “gender” and “women” were not considered as the emphasis was placed on the empowerment of women.

The search process was conducted during January 2023 with one member of the research team reading the abstract of the identified papers to ensure their relevance. A review involves certain criteria for the inclusion of studies depending on the aim (Snyder, 2019). We included empirical articles published in peer-reviewed academic journals with reference to women empowerment and tourism, whereas book chapters, conference proceedings and other types of publications (i.e. doctoral theses) were excluded. Articles on general gender issues were also excluded, as these were considered in previous review papers. Conceptual papers were also not included. The rationale for the inclusion of only empirical articles published in peer-reviewed academic journals is as follows:

- It is more insightful to include empirical studies in the review and allow for a critical appraisal of their methodologies and theoretical frameworks.
Empirical studies published in peer-reviewed journals have been screened in terms of the validity and reliability of their results and contributions and are considered reliable sources.

No specific time period was set for the search process, although the majority of empirical studies on women empowerment in tourism were published within the last decade. When the literature was identified, the title, abstract, author’s names, publication name and year of publication were exported to an Excel spreadsheet. Overall, 36 articles on women empowerment in tourism were identified with these being published in both tourism journals (i.e. Annals of Tourism Research, Tourism Management, Journal of Sustainable Tourism, Tourism Management Perspectives and Current Issues in Tourism) and non-tourism journals (i.e. Women’s Studies International Forum, Sustainability, Journal of Policy Modelling and Rural Sociology).

Then, each article was read thoroughly by both researchers to ensure that the paper was discussing women empowerment and that empowerment was not only included in the title and/or keyword. A reading by both researchers allowed for a critical analysis of the content and its subsequent categorisation into themes, sorted by similarities and differences to form thematic categories (Graneheim et al., 2017). The researchers used three rounds of coding as per the suggestion of Gioia et al. (2013). Firstly, they read the papers carefully without imposing any restrictions with regard to the analysis of the content. Secondly, they identified emerging topics which they grouped into themes while refining the data to form sub-categories. Thirdly, sub-categories were combined with topics identified to develop thematic categories further. In so doing, the researchers undertook various steps to ensure reliability. For example, they minimised researcher bias by ensuring both researchers read the papers identified separately and agreed on the categorisation of the content during analysis following discussion, thus maintaining evaluative and interpretive rigor (Kitto et al., 2008). The final output of publications is listed in a table format (Table 1), which presents the key literature on women empowerment in tourism.

Women empowerment in tourism research: mind the gaps

**Methodological gap**

There is a dominance of qualitative studies examining women empowerment in tourism. A qualitative approach seems to be the preferred method of analysis among earlier studies. In more recent years, tourism researchers began to adopt quantitative or mixed methods. Qualitative studies are important in exploring a theme or a phenomenon under study (Farmaki et al., 2021), yet they often tend to rely on the perceptions of a phenomenon and provide little measurable evidence of its effects and/or determinants. Much of the women empowerment in tourism research is perceptual in nature and focuses on female perspectives, asking participants about their involvement in tourism and their perceptions of the achievement of empowerment dimensions through travel and tourism. Using primarily semi-structured interviews and observation methods, pertinent studies examine perceptions of women regarding their empowerment within tourism contexts. For example, Panta and Thapa (2018) examined women’s perceptions of empowerment through tourism entrepreneurship. Although most studies examine female perspectives, some studies include male perceptions also (Arroyo et al., 2019) and/or the perceptions of government officials and/or tourism authorities (e.g. Su et al., 2023). Interestingly, not many studies compare and contrast women and men perspectives of women empowerment with the exception of Boley et al. (2017). Quantitative and/or mixed method research has also been adopted in women empowerment in tourism studies. Relying on analytical approaches such as structural equation modelling, studies examine women perceptions of empowerment as well as predictors of women empowerment (Abou-Shouk et al., 2021) and/or outcomes on sustainable tourism development (Elshaer et al., 2021). Notwithstanding, for in-depth knowledge to be gained on a phenomenon, methodologies of different types are required, as one complements the other.
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors/date</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Methodology</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Framework</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abdala et al. (2022)</td>
<td>Zanzibar</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>Examines the relationship between decision-making participation and women empowerment (WE)</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abou-Shouk et al. (2021)</td>
<td>UAE/Egypt/Oman</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>Examines the impact of WE on tourism development</td>
<td>Boley et al.’s empowerment dimensions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Acharya and Haipenny (2013)</td>
<td>Nepal Homestays</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>Examines how women-managed homestays empower women and contribute to gender equality</td>
<td>Social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afifi and Al-Sherif (2014)</td>
<td>Oman</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Examines women tourism employees’ attitudes to employment in terms of empowerment</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aghazamani et al. (2020)</td>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>Examines perceptions of empowerment in tourist destination</td>
<td>–</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alonso-Almeida (2012)</td>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>Examines WE in terms of water management decisions and women entrepreneurs’ contribution in tourism</td>
<td>–</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alshareef and Al-Gassim (2021)</td>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>Examines female tourism employees’ perceptions of WE</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alsawafi (2016)</td>
<td>Oman</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>Examines the perceptions of students of WE in tourism</td>
<td>–</td>
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<tr>
<td>Annes and Wright (2015)</td>
<td>France Farm tourism</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td></td>
<td>Examines the contribution of farm tourism to WE</td>
<td>Kabeer’s theory and power forms</td>
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<tr>
<td>Arroyo et al. (2019)</td>
<td>Peru Agritourism</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td></td>
<td>Examines the role of agritourism in WE</td>
<td>Scheyven’s empowerment dimensions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bagheri et al. (2022)</td>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>Examines the impact of entrepreneurship on WE</td>
<td>Scheyven’s empowerment dimensions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boley et al. (2017)</td>
<td>USA/Japan</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>Examines perceptions of residents of empowerment discrepancy between men and women in tourism</td>
<td>Resident empowerment dimensions (RETS)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elshaer et al. (2021)</td>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>Examines the impact of WE on sustainable tourism development</td>
<td>Boley’s empowerment dimensions</td>
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<td>Ertac and Tanova (2020)</td>
<td>Cyprus Ecotourism</td>
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<td>Hao et al. (2021)</td>
<td>China Guimi tourism (girlfriend getaways)</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
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<td>Examines process and mechanism of WE through Guimi tourism</td>
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<td>Irandu and Shah (2014)</td>
<td>Kenya Ecotourism</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td></td>
<td>Examines ways in which ecotourism empowers women</td>
<td>Scheyven’s empowerment dimensions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Irawan and Nara (2020)</td>
<td>Cambodia Community-based tourism</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td></td>
<td>Examines the influence of tourism on WE</td>
<td>Scheyven’s empowerment dimensions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Khalil (2018)</td>
<td>Egypt Community tourism</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td></td>
<td>Examines the ways in which tourism activities of women can empower them</td>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Khan et al. (2022)</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>Examines how social media can empower Muslim women’s tourism decision-making</td>
<td>Lazars and Folkman’s (1984) model of coping</td>
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<td>McCall and Mearns</td>
<td>South Africa</td>
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<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>Examines the impact of community-based tourism on WE</td>
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<td>McMillan et al.</td>
<td>Nepal</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>Examines how commercial hospitality impacts social change through WE</td>
<td>Social empowerment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monovo and Dahles</td>
<td>Fiji</td>
<td>Community-based tourism</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>Examines the impact of tourism entrepreneurship on WE</td>
<td>Scheyvens’s empowerment dimensions and power forms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marcinek and Hunt</td>
<td>Amazon</td>
<td>Ecotourism</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>Examines WE achievement through community-based ecotourism</td>
<td>Scheyvens’s empowerment dimensions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Moswete and Lacey</td>
<td>Botswana</td>
<td>Cultural tourism</td>
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<td>Examines empowerment perceptions of community tourism facilitating female agency</td>
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<td>Mrema (2015)</td>
<td>Tanzania</td>
<td>Responsible tourism</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Examines the role of tourism on WE</td>
<td>Scheyvens’s empowerment dimensions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nair and Dileep</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Responsible tourism</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>Examines how WE contributes to social sustainability in tourism</td>
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<td>Nassani et al.</td>
<td>European countries</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>Examines the impact of tourism development on WE</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Nwosu (2014)</td>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>Examines how hospitality education has empowered female graduates</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panta and Thapa</td>
<td>Nepal</td>
<td>Ecotourism</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>Examines the benefits and challenges of women entrepreneurs in terms of empowerment through ecotourism</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Radović-Marković and</td>
<td>Serbia</td>
<td>Green tourism</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>Examines WE through green tourism</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Živanović (2019)</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>Ecotourism</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>Examines gender dynamics’ impact on WE in an ecotourism cooperative context</td>
<td>Kabeer’s theory; focus on agency dimension</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sayfi et al. (2022)</td>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>Cultural tourism</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>Examines the effect of sanctions on WE in tourism</td>
<td>Kabeer’s theory; focus on agency dimension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Su et al. (2023)</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>Examines the perceived effect of cultural tourism on WE</td>
<td>Kabeer’s theory; focus on agency dimension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vij et al. (2023)</td>
<td>UAE</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Examines the impact of tourism training on WE</td>
<td>Kabeer’s theory; focus on agency dimension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vujko et al. (2019)</td>
<td>Serbia</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>Examines the effect of self-help groups on tourism entrepreneurship and WE</td>
<td>Kabeer’s theory; focus on agency dimension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yang et al. (2018)</td>
<td>East/South-East Asia</td>
<td>Female travellers</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>Examines solo female travel perceived risks</td>
<td>Aitchison’s (2000) power and empowerment dimensions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Table by authors
Geographic gap

Much of the literature focused on specific case studies, primarily from the developing world (Moswete and Lacey, 2015) and/or from conservative contexts such as Muslim countries (Abou-Shouk et al., 2021). An overview of pertinent research indicates that out of the 36 identified studies, 10 focused on Asian countries (Yang et al., 2018), 9 studies on the Middle East (Bagheri et al., 2022) and 8 studies centred on Africa (Nwosu, 2014). There are only six studies looking at women empowerment in a European context (Annes and Wright, 2015), three focusing on Latin America (Arroyo et al., 2019) and only one comparative study between North America and Asia (Boley et al., 2017). Only a handful of studies have compared between different geographic contexts (Abou-Shouk et al., 2021; Boley et al., 2017). This focus may not be surprising, given the position of women in such patriarchal settings, where societies tend to be heavily populated and poor, facing economic, social and health problems, one of which is gender inequality (Niaz and Hassan, 2006). According to post-structural theory, these structural inequalities need to be eliminated if women are to be empowered, as these shape power relations in a society (Cole, 2018). Nonetheless, there are prevalent gender inequalities that exist in the Western world. Therefore, more studies drawing from a Western context are needed. The European Union (2022) reports that women in Europe continue to face inequalities in terms of salary, leadership positions and participation in decision-making. Inequalities have been reported among various racial and ethnic groups of women, indicating the significance of intersectionality in women empowerment research.

Study context gap

Relevant studies draw from alternative tourism contexts such as ecotourism and community-based tourism (Arroyo et al., 2019) to investigate the effects of tourism development on women empowerment. Tourism offers employment and entrepreneurship opportunities to women; hence, the effects of women’s involvement in tourism are a focal point of pertinent studies. Approximately half of the studies look at the effect of tourism employment and/or entrepreneurship on women empowerment (Bagheri et al., 2022), with several examining women empowerment in a specific tourism setting like ecotourism or rural tourism (Arroyo et al., 2019). However, these studies tend to focus on economic empowerment overlooking other dimensions. Only a handful of studies consider the influence of women empowerment on tourism development (Abou-Shouk et al., 2021; Elshaer et al., 2021), which is surprising, as women participation in tourism is important for gender equality and sustainable development. The focus of other studies includes tourism education/training effects on women empowerment (Nwosu, 2014), women involvement in decision-making (Alonso-Almeida, 2012), the impact of sanctions and self-help groups on women empowerment (Seyfi et al., 2022) and the perceptions of female travellers in terms of women empowerment through travel (Yang et al., 2018). There is an array of other determinants and influencers of women empowerment that can be studied further. For example, the focus of studies on alternative tourism overlooks the role of women in mass tourism which still dominates the global tourism industry. The global tourism structure seems to be conducive to gender inequalities, as it encourages the exclusion of societal groups, perpetuating power imbalances between tourists and the local community as well as subgroups in the destination.

Framework gap

Around a third of existing studies seem to have adopted a descriptive approach in examining women empowerment by either qualitatively evaluating women’s perceptions of empowerment through tourism (Alsawafi, 2016) or quantitatively measuring determinants of women empowerment in tourism (Radović-Marković and Živanović, 2019) without reference to a specific theoretical framework. The rest seem to have relied largely on Scheyvens’ (2000) conceptualisation of women empowerment, which identifies economic, social, political and psychological dimensions (Bagheri et al., 2022). Boley et al.’s (2017) residents empowerment
scale which has been adjusted to female residents was also used (Abou-Shouk et al., 2021; Elshaer et al., 2021). Other studies evaluated women empowerment in tourism using Kabeer’s theory but focused mostly on the “agency” dimension and delved into power issues (Annes and Wright, 2015). Power appears to be the central focus of female travel studies (Yang et al., 2018). There is a need for research to shift to other dimensions of the women empowerment process at the micro-, meso- and macro-levels, while alternative frameworks related to women empowerment such as Cole’s three As could be considered. Tourism was acknowledged as a vehicle for women empowerment (United Nations, 2011); yet, the emphasis on whether tourism contributes to women empowerment entails that other important questions remain unanswered like how various dynamics impact women empowerment in relation to empowerment types, dimensions, processes and conditions. Studies need to position examination in a post-structural theory context looking at both material and structural constraints and sociocultural relations that manifest symbolic representations of power (Aitchison, 2005).

**Progressing the research agenda**

A foray into the literature reveals that there are several knowledge gaps to be addressed by future research. Firstly, there is a need for a variety of methods in evaluating women empowerment in tourism. Qualitative studies which seem to dominate the literature need to shift attention away from perceptual examinations and seek in-depth understanding of the meanings ascribed to women empowerment as well as women’s lived experiences. For example, Aghazamani et al. (2020) identified through their qualitative study that women perceive empowerment is a levelled experienced, opposed to Scheyven’s (2000) zero-sum concept which has been largely adopted in relevant studies. More exploratory qualitative research is required to deepen understanding of the concept within tourism, examining power trajectories present in a context and which may shape the sociocultural environment in which women empowerment evolves. It is also necessary for future qualitative research to explore feminist methodologies and rationales.

Quantitative research may expand insights into the measurement of women empowerment in tourism by offering comparative studies across various sociocultural subgroups of women so that research reflects intersectionality. Research may expand examination on the determinants of various dimensions of women empowerment as well as their effects on other variables. Although quantitative research began to emerge in the field, more quantitative and mixed method studies may provide measurable evidence of empowerment in relation to women’s access to material constraints, power relations and desired outcomes. Alkire (2005) suggested that women empowerment is subjective, and multiple research methods are needed to better evaluate the concept. Emerging studies reveal that women empowerment is perceived at multiple levels (Aghazamani et al., 2020), warranting a reconceptualisation of the concept through more exploratory research as well as explanatory research to measure potential determinants and effects at various levels.

Secondly, future research needs to include comparative studies of perspectives between different population samples such as women and men as well as tourism authorities and destination residents who are not working in tourism. For instance, concurrent investigations of male and female perceptions and attitudes of women empowerment may be useful in understanding how patriarchal societies and tourism systems consider and react to women’s desire for empowerment. Much of pertinent research reports the existence of patriarchal systems which fortify gendered roles (Annes and Wright, 2015; Moswete and Lacey, 2015). Greater knowledge on how such systems and cultures can impact the realisation of women empowerment is warranted. In addition, researchers need to expand the samples used to examine women empowerment and seek to analyse the perspectives of women employees, managers, entrepreneurs and tourists in tourism, ensuring that research reflects several sectors and organisational structures and cultures of the industry as well as management styles. For example, the rise of the sharing economy and its impact on tourism renders
research on women empowerment in this setting as it has been argued to empower users through a decentralised, equitable and sustainable economy model (Bouncken et al., 2020). A comparative research approach may also be insightful in cases of women empowerment within mass and alternative tourism contexts. Much of pertinent studies focused on examinations of women empowerment in alternative tourism contexts (Arroyo et al., 2019) overlooking mass tourism. It is critical that researchers examine women empowerment in a mass tourism context to seek understanding of how global tourism’s capitalistic nature (Bianchi, 2018) interferes with women empowerment by shaping power relations in an international, national and local context.

Furthermore, future research needs to include different geographical locations in both the developing and developed world and if possible compare and contrast women empowerment between different countries. Currently, the literature on women empowerment in tourism is focused on Asian, Middle Eastern and African contexts (Bagheri et al., 2022) with lesser attention being paid on Western settings. It is worth considering the several cultural sub-groups that may exist in Western countries and which may potentially face different circumstances and/or conditions in terms of their access to resources, control over their life-related decision-making and freedom. While women empowerment may be context-specific (Bailey, 1992), it is axiomatic that understanding of the process of its achievement, pre-requisites and constraints will be enriched if future research produces case studies that allow for comparison. Researchers need also to publish work that looks more closely at the interface between women empowerment and tourism by moving away from attempts to answer whether tourism development contributes to women empowerment. Researchers must concentrate on efforts to provide insights with regard to how tourism empowers women, what type of power dimensions does tourism offer to women and under which conditions, processes and dynamics is it achieved or inhibited. It may also be worth examining the sources of disempowerment of women that may lie in the structures prescribing tourism. Such attempts need to adopt various frameworks that will elicit reflection on the dimensions of women empowerment at the micro-, meso- and macro-levels as well as the process of its realisation, as shaped by various tourism dynamics.

To illustrate the proposed avenues for future research, Figure 1 is provided. The figure outlines the various areas that can be examined by researchers, both qualitatively and quantitatively, in relation to research on women empowerment in tourism. We propose that future research considers the concept at the individual (micro), organisational (meso) and sectorial (macro). For example, women and/or men individual characteristics, motivations and perceptions as well as experiences of empowerment can be examined and compared at the micro-level using qualitative research methodologies that may offer in-depth knowledge on the topic. Quantitative research approaches could also allow for comparative evaluation of various sociocultural subgroups of participants living in tourist places and/or being involved in tourism. At the meso-level, tourism organisational structures, cultures and managerial systems may be examined in terms of their impact on women empowerment processes. Such consideration is useful in enabling a comparison between different countries, as the structures prescribing power relations in the workplace may be better understood. Resources and conditions of women empowerment as well as power relations within organisational settings can be examined to shed light on the concept. Lastly, at the macro-level, international dynamics and sectorial influences on the process of women empowerment realisation can be investigated, given the dominance of mass tourism structures that characterise global tourism and which influence destinations.

Conclusions

This paper provided a critical review of the literature on women empowerment in tourism with the aim of identifying knowledge gaps and proposing future research trajectories. The paper recognises that several gaps exist with regard to the themes, methodologies, study
focus and approaches used to examine women empowerment in tourism. Extant research has focused mostly on non-Western countries, drew primarily from a qualitative perceptual perspective while centred investigation in alternative tourism settings without a theoretical framework. Overall, the literature attempted to examine primarily whether tourism contributes to women empowerment, overlooking other important areas of research including how various structural constraints and power dynamics impact women empowerment in relation to empowerment types, dimensions, processes and conditions.

In light of these research gaps, a number of recommendations are made. Specifically, a framework depicting potential areas of research on the topic at the macro-, meso- and micro-levels is offered. Although this paper does not provide an exhaustive review of pertinent literature, it represents an attempt to critically review extant knowledge on women empowerment in tourism and contribute to a greater understanding of the concept through further research propositions. We hope that this review paper can contribute to the inquiry on gender in tourism and overall illuminate current knowledge on sustainable development, wherein gender equality remains a goal. Notwithstanding, an expansion of relevant research carries the potential of providing significant insights at the practical level as well. More research on women empowerment in tourism will undoubtedly offer directions for policymakers and industry practitioners on the effective implementation of women empowerment initiatives and the achievement of gender equality as part of the SDG of destinations.

References


Further reading


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