

# Women in Tourism

## Realities, Dilemmas and Opportunities<sup>1</sup>

EQUATIONS  
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*In 1950, the top 15 destinations of the world absorbed 88% of international arrivals, in 1970 this proportion dipped to 75% and even further to 57% in 2005, reflecting the emergence of new destinations, many of them in developing countries. In this context, this paper explores what this growth has meant for women – particularly for women in destinations of the global south. To what extent do they benefit from this phenomenon? Has tourism opened doors for women? Has its unstoppable growth contributed to women's empowerment? 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.*

### **The Tourism Industry – On a Roll**

Consistent growth and increasing diversification has given the global tourism industry the reputation of being one of the fastest growing economic sectors worldwide. An ebullient World Tourism Organisation reports (UNWTO) that international tourism is very much on the rise -the number of international arrivals 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.

While in 1950, the top 15 destinations of the world absorbed 88% of international arrivals, in 1970 this proportion dipped to 75% and even further to 57% in 2005, reflecting the emergence of new destinations, many of them in developing countries. 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 travellers.

Continuing world prosperity has clearly been the main driver behind this boom. Asia and the Pacific stand out as the motors of international tourism expansion and the tourism juggernaut continues to move notwithstanding manmade and natural crises. Emerging markets and developing economies especially in Asia, tourism promotion by national governments especially in developing regions, increased investment in infrastructure, marketing and advertising, development of domestic markets, liberalisation of air transport, growing intraregional cooperation and a growing number of public-private partnerships are key factors in this expansion in the tourism business.

**So what does this growth mean for women – particularly for women in destinations of the global south? To what extent do they benefit from this phenomenon? Has tourism opened doors for women? Has its unstoppable growth contributed to women's empowerment?**

### **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, secure 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 mobilise 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 for equality, equity and empowerment of women? In 1996, Vivian Kinnaird and Derek Hall in '*Understanding Tourism Processes: a gender aware framework*'<sup>2</sup> 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 labour, 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.

Margaret Swain<sup>3</sup> similarly argues that tourism is built on attractions to sameness and differences. "Is the world's largest industry willing to be feminist?" she asks. A feminist worldview is non-androcentric. It explains phenomena in terms of women's as well as men's experiences. It is political when asking how to promote equity among women and men, based in understandings of the cultural and social positions of women and their subordination in relationship to men. It asks the question "does this work for women?" and seeks the perspective of women as well in interrogating data, frameworks, experiences and policies.

EQUATIONS has argued that international, national and state level policies on tourism do state a general commitment to women's empowerment but rarely go beyond that to understand and evolve specific measures. The UNWTO's Global Code of Ethics for Tourism, for instance, does not specifically address the gendered aspects of tourism although Articles 2, 6 and 9 are linked to some of the issues being debated. Article 2 calls to respect equality between men and women and promote human rights particularly individual rights for marginalised and vulnerable groups. It disapproves of exploitation of human beings, such as sexual exploitation. Article 6 concerns travel-related press material and other media and states that these should contain truthful and balanced information on travel destinations that could influence the flow of tourists. These media should not in any way promote sex tourism, it asserts. Article 9 on Rights of the workers and entrepreneurs in the tourism industry, focuses on the protection of legal rights of workers, their salaries and working conditions and argues that these should be guaranteed under the supervision of the national and local administrations. It also suggests that workers should be given sufficient social protection. Despite these clauses, it seems critical that the Global Code address issues of the empowerment and exploitation of women more directly, given the significant role that women play in tourism and the significant violations of ethics that are linked to women's experiences in tourism.

Often women are exhorted to subscribe to an individual empowerment ethic - overcome what's in your mind and you can do it! In celebration of World Tourism Day 2007 a leading travel and tourism magazine<sup>4</sup> ran a lead feature on India's "Incredible Women in Tourism" - profiling a series of urban upper/middle class women who worked in up-market travel agencies, hotels and the government in the sector. Most subscribed heavily to the individual empowerment ethic. Most felt they were not disadvantaged being a woman and the key to success was hard work and the individual will to achieve. If the magazine had featured local women in tourism destinations struggling in the sector; their perspectives, experiences and realities would have been very different. But apparently, these masses of women do not count. This attitude that policy makers, governments and the industry of tourism have adopted of viewing women's empowerment as an individual's challenge can prove to be very dangerous as it diverts focus away from the need to deal with institutionalized gender discrimination in tourism.

Policies and budgets have the potential both to perpetuate gender bias and blindness, and to transform them. Gender disaggregated data, gender-sensitive policies and indicators are essential to building up a picture of the nature and extent of gender inequality. We need to understand the way institutions with their gendered rules work and we need 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 time tourism recognised women's agency and heard their voices in its development.

### **Women's Status and Leadership – Participation in Decision Making and Political Processes**

In India, women have been viewed by governments and policy makers merely as extensions of the traditional roles they play in families and society - that of nurturers and caregivers. The focus was on promoting the welfare of women and thereby, children rather than empowering women to acquire their rights. Schemes and policies for women, therefore, were limited in both vision and approach. Rural India, where two-thirds of India's population resides, faces

enormous challenges in health, education, nutrition, employment and environment. Women bear primary responsibility in every one of these areas — day after day. India's rural women have been systematically denied the freedom, resources, information and decision-making power they need to carry out these responsibilities and have been kept in an almost unimaginable state of powerlessness, illiteracy, isolation and malnutrition. The 73rd Amendment of the Indian Constitution mandated an unprecedented transfer of decision-making power and resources in the rural areas to local democratic councils - the *panchayats*. Most revolutionary of all, one-third of all *panchayat* seats are reserved for women — guaranteeing them a role in determining the future of their communities. If fully implemented, women potentially have a voice in the decisions that affect their lives.

Early advocates of tourism viewed tourism employment as a positive way of integrating under-privileged subgroups of society into mainstream economy. However, these have tended largely to reinforce an existing sexist, ethnic and caste-based system of social stratification. In tourism particularly, women's roles in economic production cannot be understood without reference to the cultural context of women's structural position in society and the home. Kinnaird and Hall<sup>5</sup> cite the example of tourism-dependent areas of Britain and Ireland to make this point. They argue that innovations like the 'bed and breakfast accommodation' in tourism ghettoize women in ways of work that are an extension of their domestic activities. This is particularly interesting in the context of India's Ministry of Tourism (headed in succession by two very articulate women as Tourism Ministers) showcasing bed and breakfast accommodation schemes as a policy intervention towards women's empowerment. Similarly the Rural Tourism Project of the Ministry, while having the laudable aim of women's empowerment among other aims, has largely conceptualised empowerment in economic terms without taking into account the social patriarchal structures and roles that their lives are embedded in. These policy initiatives reveal the naiveté of the government in offering simplistic solutions to the need for genuine empowerment of women in tourism.

Often women's economic empowerment programmes, particularly those for poor rural women, focus on micro-credit and self-help groups. This in some ways only increases the burden on women and limits their capacity to leverage productive and scaled up micro-enterprise. An evaluation report of the Rural Tourism Project of the Ministry of Tourism<sup>6</sup> has more or less equated gender sensitisation to the formation of women's self help groups and seems to believe that this is an adequate indicator of women's empowerment. The focus instead should be on collective enterprise with women's ownership and to ensure its success requires significant capacity building and market linkages.

### **The Nature of Women's Employment in Tourism**

A very strong argument in favour of tourism development is that it generates employment at different levels due to the wide range of services and products it requires. Undoubtedly, there is truth and merit in this argument. However, it is important to understand what kind of employment local women have access to in tourism and what happens to men and women them employed in tourism.

Tourism does provide a range of activities where women can participate and also creates opportunities for entrepreneurship development. Global data on numbers of women and men working in tourism-related professions suggests that the organised tourism sector is a particularly important sector where 46 % of the workforce comprises women (in general, 30-40% of the workforce is women) (ILO 2007). Of the data available for the years between 1988 and 2005, it appears that there has been a broad increase in the participation of women in the tourism industry at a global level.

However apart from their overall presence in the industry, other factors indicate that women do not seem to benefit and be empowered particularly from tourism. As in many other sectors, there is significant horizontal and vertical gender segregation of the labour market in tourism. Vertically, the typical "gender pyramid" is prevalent - lower levels and occupations with few career development opportunities being dominated by women and key managerial positions being dominated by men. In India too, women in the organised sector in tourism are relegated to relatively low skill, low paying or stereotypical jobs like front-desk and reception, housekeeping, catering and laundry services. They face very high risks of sexual harassment and exploitation and are discouraged from forming unions or associations to consolidate their strength and influence. The proportion of women's to men's wages is less. Women feature significantly more in part time and/or temporary employment and are typically paid less than men for the same work done.

The feminisation and informalisation of the workforce in tourism, particularly in developing countries, is a matter of concern. Unfortunately, few research studies focus on the gender dimension resulting in little quantitative data on this

trend. Women are seen, and hence favoured, as a passive, compliant and sometime invisible workforce that will accept low wages without demanding for their labour and human rights. What remains constant is the low economic value accorded to work performed by women in conditions of exploitation, no job security and violations of human rights. This occurs both directly through prohibitions on labour organisation and indirectly through further abuses where women have claimed rights such as to organise or to be free from sexual harassment.

Many women workers face difficult, often exploitative conditions. India's national newspapers carried a horrifying story of a woman working in an ayurvedic massage parlour in Kerala who was allegedly set on fire by her employer after she refused sexual favours to clients. The International Labour Organisation published a report highlighting the high levels of violence, stress and sexual harassment in hotels, catering and tourism. Unsurprisingly, it is mostly women in junior positions who experience these problems, but unlike in other sectors, women face harassment not only from colleagues and managers but also from clients. Factors such as late working hours, service of alcohol, dress codes, racism, negative attitudes towards service staff and the uninhibited, sexualised nature of tourism and tourism promotion contribute to a high-risk environment for women and younger workers, as well as ethnic minority, migrant and part-time workers<sup>7</sup>. That these attitudes and difficulties prevail primarily in small scale enterprises is another myth that needs to be exposed. As the case below (see box) highlights it took India's national airline six decades to acknowledge that women can supervise cabin crew as ably as men!

#### The Maharaja's New Year gift

Air India, India's national airline, has finally decided to catch up with the 21st century and to accept the non-discriminatory provisions in the Constitution that guarantee women equal rights. Incredible as it might seem, it has taken the airline six decades to acknowledge that women can supervise members of the cabin crew as ably as men.

On December 28, 2005, Air India issued a directive stating that women could henceforth be in-flight supervisors. All these years — the airline has been in existence since 1946 — there were different employment conditions that applied to men and women. For example, Air India's female cabin crew were forced to retire many years earlier than their male counterparts. The first age set for retirement for them was 30. Slowly, after many battles it crept up to 50. Finally, some of these women turned to the Bombay High Court in 2003 and won the right to go on flying until 58, like the men. But the victory could not be savoured as within months the Supreme Court overturned the High Court judgment and held that it was not discriminatory to ask women to retire at 50.

The struggle was then taken directly to the Executive and in December 2003, the government of Atal Behari Vajpayee and the Civil Aviation Ministry passed an order asking Air India to allow airhostesses to continue flying until the age of 58.

Kalpana Sharma, India Together January 2006

Sexist and gendered attitudes abound, making it difficult for women at all levels to claim equality and equity. The Chief Justice of Karnataka High Court Cyriac Joseph, speaking to an all-woman audience at the Asia Women Lawyers' Conference<sup>8</sup> on the theme "Women's rights are human rights" declared "*there was no point in women trying to be men and do all that a man is expected to do.*" Cautioning women, he said, "*Once you lose your womanhood, there is nothing left to be protected.*"

#### **The Informal Sector<sup>9</sup> in Tourism – Invisibilising Women's Labour**

The informal sector is the most direct source of income for local communities in tourism in developing countries. In the developing world 60% of women (in non-agricultural work) work in the informal sector. Much of this is linked directly and indirectly to tourism. The role of women in informal tourism settings such as running home-stay facilities, restaurants and shacks, crafts and handicrafts, handloom, small shops and street vending is significant. But these roles and activities that women perform in tourism are treated as invisible or taken for granted. The need to acknowledge the important economic contribution of women and ensure for them, access to credit, capacity building and enhanced skills, access to the market, encouragement to form unions, associations and cooperatives to increase their bargaining power and to ensure that their safety health and social security needs are met is critical.

Creating opportunities for income generating activities, effective marketing and integrating women's entrepreneurship with various government schemes to promote women's self employment, would be an important component to promote women's participation in tourism development. The sharing of experiences in tourism, understanding and

demystifying complex official documents, such as tourism policies, master plans, related to the industry, providing information about access to documents are also important steps.

Community based tourism initiatives, particularly of local women's groups and co-operatives can be an accessible and suitable entry point for women's participation in tourism. They seem to generate more long-term motivation than initiatives from outside.<sup>10</sup> These activities help to create financial independence for local women and help them to develop the necessary skills and improve their education, which in turn increase self-esteem and help create more equitable relationships in families and communities.

### **Women and Natural Resources**

There is a direct correlation between the depletion of natural resources and increased burden on women in daily work in any region of the world. When tourism restricts community access to or contributes to the depletion of natural resources, it is women not only as homemakers, but also as community members, who suffer the most. Women's access to and control over forest produce and water comes into sharp conflict when tourism usurps these very resources needed to fulfil their life and livelihood needs. The daily burden on women of finding water for the household or firewood for cooking is oftentimes doubled or tripled.

When tourism displaces people from traditional livelihoods or worse still physically displaces them, the worst affected are women who are engaged in the bulk of ancillary occupations like tobacco cultivation, coconut harvesting, fish sorting and processing which are jeopardised through such displacement. Transition from certain activities to others, for example away from agriculture, could have implications for food security. Certain traditional occupations risk being crowded out that could have an effect on the society as a whole. A study in Kumarakom in Kerala showed that women moved out of agriculture to tourism linked construction work as it paid them better daily wages. But having neglected the fields, they ended up losing on both counts as the construction work was only short-term but they could not return to cultivate fields overgrown with weeds. It becomes the prerogative of governments and the industry to ensure that rather than displace them, tourism should build and bolster supplementary livelihood options that women can choose from.

The demand for water by hotels can mean less local water for nearby farmers, which can affect food production and increase the workload of women in collecting water from other sources. The establishment of golf courses and special tourism zones or enclaves can also put severe constraints on land and water resources for communities burdening the women the most. The incriminating links between tourism and climate change will unfortunately add to the burden women already bear.

### **Severe Abuse of Human Rights –Trafficking of Women and Sex Tourism**

The gross violation of human rights due to sex tourism and trafficking of women are the shadow side of the booming tourism industry. Migration and trafficking of women, both from within developing countries and cross border to service the tourist trade is commonplace. Russian women to Thailand and the Philippines and Goa, eastern European women to European countries and women from Nepal and Bangladesh are trafficked to India to service the sex trade. The reports of the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women (UNCHR) have highlighted the linkages between countries in economic transition and the increase in trafficking and forced prostitution of women.

Though there are efforts by few tourism service providers to condemn child sex tourism and actively participate in campaigns that combat it, tourism industry bodies have not taken serious action against the exploitation of women in trafficking and sex tourism. In fact while tourism is celebrated as a globalised and modernised form of development - it is global tourism, globalised crime and technology like the internet that have also given the sex industry new means of exploiting, marketing and supplying women and children as commodities to buyers<sup>11</sup>.

### **The Representation of Women in Tourism**

The ideological constructs of the advertising industry have infused the tourism, aviation and hospitality industry. In tourism marketing, women are the 'face' of the sector, being the most widely-used objects in tourism promotion after natural beauty and cultural heritage. Women have been objectified and depicted as pleasure providers<sup>12</sup>- their images often exoticised, patronising and misleading.

There is also a strong case for eliminating sexual objectification of women working in the tourism industry. With sex tourism being the most negative and prominent example, there is a significant amount of sexual objectification of women working in the tourism industry. Women are expected to dress in an "attractive" manner, to look beautiful

(i.e. slim, young, and pretty) and to "play along" with sexual harassment by customers<sup>13</sup>. Stereotypical and sexist images of women are often part of tourism promotion in brochures and advertisements. Friendly, smiling and pliant women fitting certain standards of attractiveness, attired in traditional costumes, waiting to submissively serve the customer's every wish is the typical portrayal of women in tourism material. The industry however has chosen not to be particularly disturbed by this view of women, of seeing it as a gross violation of their dignity and rights, and believes it to be justified in the sale of a product. It is time the global tourism industry takes responsibility for the way women are used in the selling of tourism and also addresses this in its code of ethics.

Tourism modifies local cultural practices in ways that affect men and women differentially. For example, in Kumarakom, increased houseboat tourism severely restricted privacy of local women who used the same backwaters to bathe and to meet with other women socially. When tourism makes products of culture, it tends to commodify women in particular – although both men and women are impacted by the insensitive selling of culture. Jane Henrici<sup>14</sup> gives an interesting example of women in Peru – *"Before the tourists came, when a woman wore flowers in her hair in public, it meant she was available to enter into a dating relationship. Once the tourists arrived they liked to take pictures of the photogenic women wearing flowers. Soon the pressure built for all women in the market to wear flowers – detaching it from its cultural meaning and becoming a pure aesthetic signifier in a touristic frame."*

### **The Challenges Ahead**

The tourism industry and stewards of tourism development face many serious social and human challenges in the years ahead. The growing links between migration - both voluntary and forced - and tourism needs to take into account the gender dimensions of this global phenomenon. HIV/AIDS is not only driven by gender inequality but entrenches it. Tourism is increasingly seen to have a role in this entrenchment in its links to trafficking, prostitution and sex tourism.

A categorical position condemning the blatant and inhuman exploitation of women in tourism through trafficking and the sex industry is a moral challenge that the global tourism industry needs to respond to. Declaring that the tourism product will not be promoted at the expense of women's dignity, respect and rights is the other position that the industry needs to endorse and practice.

The increasing trend of promoting tourism in conflict zones and the consequent impacts it has on women who are already battling for survival is another matter of serious concern. Disasters and epidemics have an uneasy relationship with tourism – but gender dimensions are rarely integrated into assistance and reconstruction efforts with the focus being largely on the safety of tourists and revival of tourism infrastructure.

Engendering tourism policy and understanding tourism's impacts on women will be key steps to combating the feminization and informalisation of the workforce in tourism, particularly in developing countries. Research that focuses on the gender dimension of this process could lead to policy and interventions that can work to the advantage of women. Most policies today focus on and favour large and medium enterprise in tourism. Shifting the focus to privilege small and micro-enterprise will not only lead to sustainable options, but create more viable spaces for women's engagement in tourism.

Poverty, and in particular urban poverty, which threatens to be an issue of growing magnitude has deep roots in gender injustice. Tourism often wipes out the existence and means of livelihood of the urban poor in an overt manner while continuing to depend covertly on cheap labour and exploitative relationships in order to flourish. Ensuring basic protection in terms of social security, access to information and credit and market linkages will be critical to enable larger numbers of women in the informal economy - both in rural and urban areas - to gain from tourism.

Women's engagement to assert their rights as stakeholders in all aspects of tourism development (planning, implementation, participation, ownership and monitoring) is also determined by their informed participation in decision making spaces. Facilitating an understanding of tourism and its patterns among women would not only enable them to raise questions about the course of tourism development but also make claims on its outcomes.

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## End Notes

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1 The experiences of women as tourists is increasingly a topic for study and research. This paper however focuses on women who live in tourism destinations, particularly destinations in the global South

2 Tourism Management, Vol 17, No 2 1996

3 Gender/Tourism/Fun (?) Eds. Swain and Momsen CCC 2002. Swain (1995) offered the following definition of Gender in tourism : A system of culturally constructed identities, expressed in ideologies of masculinity and femininity, interacting with socially structured relationships in divisions of labour and leisure, sexuality, and power between women and men

4 Express Travel World September 2007

5 Kinnard and Hall 1996 ibid

6 Evaluation study Rural Tourism Scheme Mott MacDonald MoT June 2007

7 Gender, Globalisation and Tourism Cultures, Presented by Dr. Annette Pritchard at the Special Meeting of Women Ministers of Culture, 2005 <http://womenministers.government.is/Programme//nr/3269>

8 Women must not try to be men: Cyriac Joseph

23/09/2007 URL: <http://www.thehindu.com/2007/09/23/stories/2007092354980500.htm>

9 There is no universally accepted upon definition of the "informal sector". However, the interpretation of the term best suited for an understanding of issues referred to in this paper is provided by the ILO in its report – "Decent Work and the Informal Economy" (International Labour Conference, 90th session, 2002). "...These different groups have been termed "informal" because they share one important characteristic: they are not recognized or protected under the legal and regulatory frameworks. This is not, however, the only defining feature of informality. Informal workers and entrepreneurs are characterized by a high degree of vulnerability. They are not recognized under the law and therefore receive little or no legal or social protection and are unable to enforce contracts or have security of property rights."

10 Gender & Tourism: Women's Employment and Participation in Tourism, UNED- UK project report summary 1999

11 Hughes, M.D., "The Internet and Sex Industries: Partners in Global Sexual Exploitation," Technology and Society Magazine, Spring 2000.

12 Tourism – Its Effects on Women in Goa, a report to the People', Bailancho Saad; Goa, 1987.

13 Gruetter, K. & Pluess, Ch. (Hg.), 1996. Herrliche Aussichten! Frauen im Tourismus. Zuerich: Rotpunktverlag (Splendid Views! Women in Tourism)

14 Calling to the Money : Gender and Tourism in Peru Jane Henrici Gender/Tourism/Fun (?) Eds Swain and Momsen CCC 2002