

Fostering **gender equality** in **tourism community participation**

ANAHITA MALE * [anahita@ua.pt]

CARLOS COSTA ** [ccosta@ua.pt]

Keywords | Gender equality, Tourism, Community development, ICT, Portugal.

At the international level, there is a considerable body of literature on gender, but it seems that tourism research from a gender perspective is at an infant stage (Costa, Carvalho, Caçador & Breda, 2012; Upadhayaya & Upreti, 2008). Most of the research that has been conducted in the field of tourism and gender over the last two decades has focused mainly on women's employment patterns and overlooked the importance of women's participation in decision-making. Meanwhile, a review of literature focused on these areas revealed that women extensively suffer from discrimination within the tourism sector, as they have been denied direct opportunities for leadership positions and responsibility within the industry and therefore concentrated in low-skilled and low-paid occupations (World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), 2011). However, tourism can be used to challenge traditional roles and lead to the socio-economic empowerment of women (UNED-UK, 2002). On top of this, it is believed that more investment in strategies for women to make them realise their full political, economic and social rights may constitute a significant impact on poverty reduction and an alternative way for economies to move forward (Costa et al., 2012). In fact, some studies (Dunn, 2007; Zappino, 2005) provide evidence that involvement of women in community-based tourism contributes to continuous economic growth and could improve sustainability. Therefore, how to make sure that the interests of women are taken into consideration in different stages of the community development process?

There are only a few documented experiences of programs that target women in tourism community development. The minimal findings of these studies show weak position of women in power sharing and decision-making, as well as lack of strong government policies sensitive to gender issues (Upadhayaya & Upreti, 2008). While women are contributing with a substantial amount of labour to tourism businesses, and to the implementation of community development initiatives, significant gender inequalities still persist.

The project report *Gender and tourism*, developed by the UNED-UK (1999), demonstrated that women can find voice and independence through getting involved in tourism activities by becoming part of decision-making processes and carving out new roles in their families, communities and within local power structures. Another project report *Gender makes the*

* **Post-Doc Researcher** at the Research Unit on Governance, Competitiveness and Public Policies of the University of Aveiro (Portugal).

** **PhD in Tourism** from the University of Surrey (UK). **Full Professor** at the Department of Economics, Management and Industrial Engineering. **Integrated Member** of the Research Unit on Governance, Competitiveness and Public Policies of the University of Aveiro (Portugal).

difference, by Vargas and Aguilar (2004), revealed that women's participation in tourism enterprises not only contributes to decreasing individual and household poverty but can also alter the gendered structure of work and decision-making within the wider community. Thus, women who previously felt themselves to be devoid of status and power, gain increased standing and esteem within society through involvement in leadership. Finally, the *Global report on women in tourism*, by the UNWTO (2010), indicated that participation of women in decision-making and problem solving has enabled them to lose their initial inhibitions and discover their enormous capacity for endurance. According to this report, if a strong gender perspective is integrated into planning and implementation processes, tourism can be harnessed as a vehicle for promoting equality and women's empowerment at the household, community, national and global level.

At the same time, studies prove that Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) can play an important role in improving gender equality in education and employment, as well as increasing participation and access of women to expression and decision-making. The project report on gender equality and empowerment of women through ICTs, entitled *Women 2000 and beyond*, by the United Nations (2005), further suggested that, for women to take control over decisions that shape their lives by participation in decision-making, ICTs are one promising area of innovation, especially in terms of overcoming isolation, and providing a voice. However, while existing gender discrimination negatively impact on women's potential to fully utilize ICTs for economic, social and political empowerment, studies confirmed that ICTs can be used as an important tool to mainstream gender equality perspective by enhancing access to information and communication resources for remote rural areas and poor communities, as a result, contributing to the process of democratization and amelioration of the endemic problem of poverty. ICTs emerge in this context as an innovative approach having the potential to encourage women's participation in decision-making processes by enabling two-way interactions between policy-makers and the community. However, despite common beliefs, a study has shown that while women use ICTs less intensively, they actually embrace digital technology even more than men (Hilbert, 2011). This shows that if woman directed and guided properly, ICTs have the potential to provide them a real start up opportunity to tackle longstanding inequalities and social discriminations. So far, research on gender and technology has largely looked at how women are excluded from access to ICTs. This study, instead, tries to have a different look into what needs to happen now that many women are included, by targeting all women with access to ICTs (with a special focus on the younger generation), in order to understand how women are already using the Internet and how they can benefit more broadly from it, in order to make the best decisions for themselves and their families. The ultimate aim is empowering women through practical knowledge and skills to actively participate in decision-making in every activity affecting their lives.

This work aims to provide a better understanding of women's participation patterns in decision-making in the field of tourism and within the Portuguese context. The underlying idea is the creation of new and innovative methods involving women as critical agents in decision-making, planning and development of tourism destinations, in order to generate opportunities for women to become actively involved in changing problematic conditions that affect the quality of their lives. Furthermore, this research focuses on ICTs, on the role that such key variable can play in changing gender stereotypes, as well as finding ways in which ICTs can be used for women's involvement in decision-making in tourism within their communities.

Given the importance of this issue in today's agenda of several governments and international organisations, it is important that the civil society gets involved in it, because significant changes need to be done at the grassroots, namely mentality changes. In the Portuguese context, the topic of gender equality in the tourism field is far from being thoroughly studied. By looking at the existing literature on gender studies in tourism, this gap in knowledge/application has been identified, making clear that a more analytical approach is necessary. Besides its practical implications, this research will make significant contributions for knowledge, by integrating the technological approaches with gender issues in the tourism industry.

References |

- Costa, C., Carvalho, I., Caçador, S., & Breda, Z. (2012). Future higher education in tourism studies and the labor market: Gender perspectives on expectations and experiences. *Journal of Teaching in Travel & Tourism*, 12(1), 70-90.
- Dunn, S. (2007) *Toward empowerment: Women and community-based tourism in Thailand*. Unpublished M.A. thesis: University of Oregon.
- Hilbert, M. (2011). Digital gender divide or technologically empowered women in developing countries?: A typical case of lies, damned lies, and statistics. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 34(6), 479-489.
- UNED-UK (1999). *Gender & tourism – Women's employment and participation in tourism: Project Report*. Accessed on 22 July 2013, available at <http://www.unedforum.org/publi/tourism/gendertourismsum.pdf>

- UNED-UK (2002). *Toolkit for women – Gender & tourism: Women’s employment and participation in tourism*. Accessed on 2 July 2013, available at <http://www.earthsummit2002.org/toolkits/women/intro/staff.html>
- United Nations (2005). *Women 2000 and beyond: Gender equality and the empowerment of women through ICT*. Accessed on 15 September 2013, available at <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/public/w2000-09.05-ict-e.pdf>
- Upadhayaya, P. K., & Upreti, B. R. (2008). *Enhancing women’s participation in mountain tourism*. Accessed on 12 September 2013, available at <http://lib.icimod.org/record/13555/files/1265.pdf>
- Vargas, M., & Aguilar, L. (2004). Gender makes the difference – Tourism: Fact sheet. In *3rd World Conservation Congress of IUCN*. International Union for Conservation of Nature.
- World Tourism Organization [UNWTO] (2010). *Global report on women in tourism: Preliminary findings*. Accessed on 5 May 2013 available at <http://www2.unwto.org/sites/all/files/pdf>
- World Tourism Organization [UNWTO] (2011). *Tourism a vehicle for gender equality and women’s empowerment*. Accessed on 22 September 2013, available at <http://europe.unwto.org/en/news/2011-03-11>
- Zappino, V. (2005) *Caribbean tourism and development: An overview*. ECDPM Discussion Paper No. 65. Maastricht: ECDPM.