

# **Women Empowerment through Community-based and Rural Tourism: An Actor-network Perspective**

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## **Abstract**

Women empowerment has dominated discussions at local and global scales. Development organisations are continuously translating issues of women empowerment into their practices seeking for more efficient strategies to achieve women empowerment. Community based and rural tourism has presented a complex situation with numerous chances in fulfilling this task albeit with challenges. The challenges include those that are directly produced by women's involvement in the tourism sector such as; sexual exploitation and human trafficking, disparities in payments between men and women employed in tourism, caging women in domestic like jobs such as housekeeping, and catering among others. Other challenges such as climate change affect women and tourism and thus have a significant implication for women empowerment through tourism. This paper uses the actor-network concept of ordering as a methodological lens to view the intricate nature of women empowerment through tourism. Other than condemn tourism for creating such challenges, this paper argues that actually tourism illuminates the challenges that have always existed in covert ways. Therefore, by addressing these challenges that is; internalizing the externalities and engaging with emerging issues such as climate change, community tourism can be used innovatively to usher in another ordering phase that will re affirm women's abilities and potential seniority in dealing global challenges. The ordering phase would connect as many women dominated entities, such as agriculture, into community based tourism

**Key words:** *community based tourism, women empowerment, actor networks, ordering*

## **Introduction**

Since the 1848 Seneca Falls Women's Rights Conference and the subsequent *Declaration of Sentiments*, issues of women empowerment have infiltrated into almost all spheres of the global and local debates, within and outside the academia. Tourism is one of such phenomenon that engages both the global and the local and has been no exception to this turn. There is no more profound avenue to demonstrate that women empowerment has entered the realms of the most popular and rapidly growing global industry than the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO)'s resolution to include women empowerment among its 'triple commitment' objectives to the Millennium Development

Goals (UNWTO, 2008). As the fastest growing industry, tourism indeed has shown potential in not only contributing to but also championing women empowerment. UNWTO (2008) for example, reveals that women make 60-70% of the total tourism workforce. And elsewhere (Ong, 2009) clearly reveals how tourism, with the embedded element of social entrepreneurship, can perfectly work as the KEY to Unlock doors for women. From the above examples, it is therefore undoubtable that tourism especially community based and rural tourism has created chances and opportunities for women empowerment.

However, despite such vivid examples, there are many researchers who are still sceptical about the potential of tourism to open doors for the rural poor and generally women empowerment. For example, Chok, Macbeth and Warren, (2007) and Scheyvens, (2000) are doubtful suggesting further scrutiny of the proposition that tourism can alleviate poverty and empower women. While Equations (2007) adds that tourism keeps women in traditional tasks such as housekeeping, waitresses and running accommodation units. Drawing from African examples, this paper uses the Actor-network perspective to challenge such arguments and bring hope to all involved in the noble task of making tourism work for women by critically unpacking the different ceilings that have been so far shattered.

### **Women in Africa and the Tourism Industry**

Most cultures in Africa considered women as a weaker sex restricted to household chores and garden work. Ufomata (2000) further indicates that in Africa, a woman is defined by her marriage roles and the husbands, the neighbourhood as well as in laws has an upper hand in decision making. DFID (2005) defines women's empowerment as "A process of transforming gender relations through groups or individuals developing awareness of women's subordination and building their capacity to challenge it". According to Kabeer, empowerment refers to "the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them" (Kabeer, 1999: 473). An almost similar definition is given by Sen as the "expansion of capabilities of persons to lead the kinds of lives they value" (Sen, 1999: 18). In addition, Deshmukh-Ranadive (2003) argues that empowerment does not happen when incomes are generated and livelihoods enhanced, because this does not change the hierarchies and structures at household and family levels.

The actor network perspective however refrains from looking at phenomenon in simplistic organised order with stipulated roles and defined groups and therefore draws away from

offering prescriptive solutions to overcome structures, hierarchies and powers. In fact Law (1994) cautions against such modernist thinking that there is nothing like an organised order but rather a complex chaotic process of ordering. Latour(2005) also adds that, the social world cannot just be perceived in such formulations as it is rather complex and chaotic. The social is not static and there is no formal order that persists but rather a process of ordering that generates effects such as women empowerment. After all, women are also not homogeneous; they are differentiated in context, race and norms. Actor-network theory does not look at individual entities, for example, ANT does not take women as an isolated unit but as part of the different entities that move the ordering process. Tourism is one of such phenomenon that demonstrates how such entities from human and non human worlds change and re-shape norms, practices and rules within space and time. This paper appropriates ANT in the tourism-women empowerment debate to hopefully bring an understanding of how the initially perceived 'order' has been changed that is; reordered to a time when women empowerment through tourism has become a major topic in academic and non academic debates at the local and global levels.

Prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, women's rights and were unheard of. Their potential had been sealed off by the concrete ceiling of social, political, cultural and economic barrier with even no right to vote. In Africa, their role was restricted to house chores and basically no movement out of the home area could be thought of. Through the ordering process that started in the 1848 Seneca Falls Conference, by the 19<sup>th</sup> century cracks had already been realised in the concrete ceiling evident in the popularization of the women's movement and success in attaining their rights to vote and later to work outside the formally designated roles. Currently we are increasingly witnessing a situation where women have contested for presidency, even in Africa, and more so engaged in tourism not only as workers in the hotels and homes but also as tourists – and solo travellers for that matter. The perception of women as fragile and unable to perform certain tasks or even travel alone has been and will continuously be eroded through the ordering process.

Notwithstanding, the above mentioned breakthroughs there are some challenges faced in attempts to make tourism empower women. In relation to ecotourism projects, Scheyvens (2000) 'talks on behalf' of third world women that social norms still prevail in determining which kind of activity rural women engage in thus most of them are left to informal work when lodges and tourist sites are developed. Equations,(2007) argue that tourism has only

reinforced inequalities between men and women citing sex tourism, stereotyped roles and representation of women in tourism, disparities in payments and the fact that there are a few women in managerial positions. I wish to place a caveat here, and indicate that these challenges are not unique to the tourism industry, they have existed right from household to other levels and sectors although in covert ways. In fact tourism has shed light on all the challenges and intricate nature of the social and how this has always impacted on women. Therefore, my position here is that these challenges and those to come do not spell tourism's failure to empower women but as ANT clearly indicates, each phase in the ordering process produces externalities. Externalities are the negative outcomes of the ordering process as different entities (women as key entities here) try to reinforce and carve out their position in the network. So, climate change, sexual exploitation and disparities among others can be viewed as the externalities produced by the process of trying to get women empowered by tourism.

The hope is that even still, development of women initiated and managed community and rural tourism enterprises present another chance (phase of ordering) where such challenges can be addressed. In fact, in some places, women are already overcoming these barriers slowly but surely shattering even the glass ceilings. Kamuzoora (n.d) for example presents two cases in which a combination of Information Communication Technology (ICT) and rural tourism expanded the capabilities of two women groups to lead valuable lives. In fact in one of the cases, Kamuzoora indicates that just from humble beginnings, one woman managed to establish a tour company, developed a website for her tour company, and her efforts were further buttressed by appointing her Director in the Tanzania Tourism Board. This is a classic example of Ong (2009)'s argument that tourism is a key which if innovatively applied, can surely unlock doors for women.

Recently, climate change is the key emerging challenge that has been identified to seriously affect both tourism and women to the extent that many are losing hope especially for the African continent (Deutsche Bank Research, 2008; UNDP, 2008). This is a challenge that might seem to be beyond the means of the rural women in tourism, and more so for the projects however, I view this as another chance for the women to globally re-assert their role, leadership and seniority in dealing with environmental issues. In short, I am envisioning another wave in the ordering process in which women weave into the changing nature, practices, and innovative tourism enterprises among other entities to adapt to and prove that they are even more resilient to the effects of climate change.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has indicated that women empowerment through tourism presents a complex situation with chances and challenges intricately weaved together. The paper has used the actor network perspective to unpack this situation and provide a perspective of hope amidst the seeming chaos. The examples reveal that indeed tourism has gone a long way to provide opportunities and that the challenges can be addressed by incorporating them in the ordering process to produce innovations in tourism. Such innovations will include facilitating and creating avenues for women to innovatively initiate and manage tourism projects that also address key global challenges.

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