CHAPTER 11

Promoting Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment Through Tourism in Africa: Towards Agenda 2030

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Abstract The importance of women in achieving development goals is well established in global policy and practice. However, there is a dearth of knowledge on the utilisation of tourism to achieve Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5—gender equality and empowerment for all women and girls—especially within the African context. It is against this backdrop that this chapter explores the gender dimension of tourism as a development option in Africa. Specifically, the chapter explores the theme, gender equality and women’s empowerment through tourism in Africa by highlighting the tourism and gender dynamics in Africa. Strategies for
promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment through tourism in Africa are also discussed.

**Keywords**  Tourism • Gender equality • Women’s empowerment • Sustainable Development Goals • Africa

**Introduction**

Increasingly, changes in the socio-economic conditions globally are challenging the traditional gendered restrictions placed on women, forcing many of them to take up work outside the home to contribute to the household income (Lansky, Ghosh, Meda, & Rani, 2017). According to UN Women (2019), when women are economically disadvantaged, the effect is not limited to them but extends to their families and communities. The socio-cultural restrictions that women face with regard to access to education, property rights, governance, finance and social networks have mainly limited their employment to the informal sector (Amu, 2005). Further, women are confronted with discriminatory labour market issues, which result in gender wage gaps and unequal access to jobs (UN Women, 2018). Nevertheless, when women are empowered, they are in a position to effectively deal with these challenges that confront them (UN Women, 2020). This view underlines the United Nations’ new global development agenda—*Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)*. Specifically, this agenda recognises that ‘gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls will make a crucial contribution to progress across all the 17 goals and 162 targets’ (UN General Assembly, 2015).

In Africa, women are the most affected by poverty, making them the ‘poorest of the poor’ (McFerson, 2010). Besides, they are still being oppressed by traditions and socio-cultural norms (Kalabamu, 2006; Nukpezah & Blankson, 2017). According to UNWTO (2015), the tourism sector has the potential to create several income-generating opportunities through which women can be empowered. This means that tourism can contribute to gender equality and empowerment of women in Africa. Currently, women make up about 54 per cent of the global tourism workforce. Until the occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism represented about 10.3 per cent of the global gross domestic product (GDP)
and accounted for about 330 million direct and indirect jobs (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2020). The 2018 Global Report on Women in Tourism identifies five thematic areas in which tourism can aid in achieving gender equality and women’s empowerment. These areas are as follows:

- Tourism providing decent work for women
- Women’s tourism businesses leading to women’s economic empowerment
- Tourism education and training to promote gender equality and women’s empowerment in the sector
- Women as leaders in the tourism sector and being represented and influential in decision-making spaces
- Tourism empowering women to work collectively for justice and gender equality

Africa, as a continent, has attracted its share of tourism in terms of volume and value over the years. International arrivals to the continent have steadily increased from 2.7 million arrivals in 1967 to about 67 million in 2018 (UNWTO, 2019b). Further, there is evidence of tourism spurring on the establishment of a large number of tourism-related small- and medium-sized tourism enterprises, which have contributed significantly to the livelihoods of many in Africa. Hence, for the over 413 million poor people living on the continent, tourism may represent a great opportunity for making economic and social progress in terms of enhanced businesses, income generation, improved livelihoods, gender equality and women’s empowerment (Boakye, Otibo, & Frempong, 2013; The World Bank, 2015).

The questions that arise, which this chapter seeks to find answers to, are: (1) How supportive is tourism to women in Africa? (2) How does it (tourism) aid in addressing the issues of gender inequality and women disempowerment in Africa? (3) What strategies can Africa consider with regard to tourism as it works towards the achievement of gender equality and empowerment of women? These questions are pertinent as the world marks the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Women Conference of 1995, which set the gender equality agenda and with ten years remaining to fulfil Agenda 2030 of the UN SDGs. Given that scholars (e.g. Ferguson, 2011; Turker & Boonabaana, 2012) have bemoaned the lack of gender perspective to the tourism-development discourse, this chapter seeks to fill that
gap by offering a gender perspective to tourism’s potential as a development option.

The main text of the chapter is divided into three sections. Section “Tourism, Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment Nexus” reviews the literature on the intersections of tourism, gender equality and women’s empowerment. The next section presents empirical evidence of the relationship between tourism, gender equality and women’s empowerment in Africa. And the last section discusses strategies that can be employed towards the attainment of SDG 5 in Africa bearing in mind tourism and Agenda 2030.

**Tourism, Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment Nexus**

The contribution of the tourism industry to social and economic life has not gone unnoticed in the literature (Darmayasa, Kusuma, Sapta, & Agung, 2018; Ezeuduji, 2015; Scholtz & Slabbert, 2016). Tourism has the potential to go beyond employment generation to contribute to achieving gender equality and women empowerment (Mrema, 2015). This has necessitated the focus of tourism-related studies on gender (Duffy, Kline, Mowatt, & Chancellor, 2015; Ferguson & Alarcon, 2015). Interestingly, several international organisations such as the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) and the World Bank have consistently emphasised the role of tourism in promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment (Ferguson & Alarco, 2015). The World Tourism Organisation (2019a), in its global report on women in tourism, stated that the majority of the tourism workforce worldwide are females. However, women earn less than men in the tourism industry. The report highlighted that the tourism industry provides women with the greatest opportunity for leadership roles as 23 per cent of ministers in the tourism industry are females.

The economic contribution of women in the tourism industry and the number of females who are actively involved in the tourism industry provide an avenue to pursue and achieve UN SDG 5, which is geared towards ensuring gender equality and women empowerment. As stated earlier, the tourism industry provides an avenue for women to earn a living and also an opportunity to occupy leadership positions so that women are represented in the tourism industry. However, the question as to whether
women’s representation in the industry signifies gender equality still remains. From the report of the World Tourism Organisation (2019a, 2019b), women are represented but still earn less than their male counterparts. This is still a subject that requires urgent attention. Until women and men have equal representation in leadership positions, and women also earn as much as their male counterparts, gender equality remains a discourse in the tourism industry.

The World Tourism Organisation (2019a, 2019b) also recognises the dangers of gender inequality to women’s economic empowerment and participation in the tourism industry and, therefore, suggested that women should be empowered through technological innovation, as technology is an important factor for women’s empowerment in the tourism industry. Also, it opined that training opportunities for stimulating entrepreneurship should be provided for women to enhance their tourism opportunities.

Tourism, Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment in the African Context

Most of the tourism interventions on the continent have adopted a pro-poor or community-based approach to generate benefits and opportunities for all, including the vulnerable and underprivileged. Overall, there is both positive and negative evidence for and against tourism on the issue of gender equality and women’s empowerment in the formal and informal sectors of tourism in Africa. In many instances, evidence suggests that tourism generates varied benefits and opportunities for women to engage in decent work and gain economic independence and empowerment. For example, Moswete and Lacey (2015), in their study of women’s empowerment through cultural tourism in Botswana, found that tourism created varied income-generating opportunities for women, most of whom were either single parents or breadwinners. The women felt empowered; they had a sense of self-sufficiency, created from their income-generating activities. From this income, they were able to provide for the needs of their households. Similar observations were made in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, by Nzame (2008), Tucker and Boonabaana (2012) in Uganda, and Afenyo (2018) in Ghana. For these women, tourism has enabled them to attain financial independence, a sense of purpose and leadership of their household.
Tourism’s potential to empower women to work collectively and to be influential in their own space is exemplified by the cases of self-help and cooperative groups established by women in various tourism settings in Africa (Boonabaana, 2014; Scheyvens, 2000). These groups served a myriad of purposes. Tourism-related work outside the home gives women the chance to interact and network with others. Boonabaana (2014) reported how such interactions and networking activities led to some women cultural groups in Uganda forming informal lending and borrowing institutions to enable their members to pool resources for self-help. Properties were also acquired through these networks. A similar women self-help cooperative group was also formed in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Beyond the financial assistance they offered their members, they had their members trained in basic business and soft skills. Some members of the group got the confidence to return to school to learn how to read and write (Scheyvens, 1999). These efforts can be channelled into negotiating for justice and equality where gaps exist.

Yet women’s tourism engagement is highly restricted and full of bias. It has been acknowledged that society’s gendered roles and responsibilities shaped women’s engagement in tourism-related economic activities (e.g. Garcia-Ramon, Canoves, & Valdovinos, 1995). Significant patterns that emerged from the gender-related studies are that females were more likely to engage in home-based tourism-related activities which reflected their traditional roles as homemakers, while the males engaged in vigorous, out-of-home tourism-related activities as the breadwinners of the homes (Garcia-Ramon, Canoves, & Valdovinos, 1995). Some males are quite unaccepting of the changing role and status that tourism has provided women and have placed restrictions on their wives’ and female family members’ choice of tourism work. Women who tried to challenge the status quo and engaged in perceived male activities were labelled as rebels and stubborn (Tucker & Boonabaana, 2012). In terms of bias, Scheyvens (2000), in a review of women empowerment through ecotourism in Third World countries, noted that in Mahenye, Zimbabwe, out of 15 positions in a local lodge, only three were filled by women. At the Chilo Lodge also, out of 38 positions, women only occupied 4. In some instances, male-dominated clubs were more likely to get support from ecotourism funds than their female counterparts. There is also a bias in the formal tourism sector in terms of the pay and positions (e.g. Adebayo, 2015) and the sexual objectification of women in tourism work (e.g. Kibicho, 2016; Vettori & Nicolaides, 2016).
In the past two years, action towards the achievement of gender equality and women empowerment through tourism in Africa has intensified. In November 2019, for instance, the UNWTO in collaboration with the government of Ghana with support from IE University, the World Bank, UN Women and the German Development Agency organised the first regional congress on women’s empowerment in the tourism sector in Africa. The event, which was hosted in Ghana, brought together a diverse audience within the tourism space to deliberate on women equality and empowerment issues, with a special focus on entrepreneurship, technology, education and leadership. This was followed up with the ‘Freetown Forum’ in Sierra Leone, organised by the World Bank Group’s We-Fi (Women Entrepreneurs Finance Initiative), in collaboration with the UNWTO and the Ministry of Tourism & Cultural Affairs, Sierra Leone, held in the same month. This programme sought to set the ‘agenda for action on women’s empowerment in tourism’. The areas the Forum addressed were employment, entrepreneurship, leadership, policy and decision-making, education and training, community and civil society, and research for better policies. Besides, most countries across the continent have ministries or government agencies that have oversight responsibility for gender issues. The activities of international organisations, including the World Bank, MasterCard Foundation and the US State Department-led Academy for Women Entrepreneurs, are lending support to the socio-economic development and advancement of women in Africa.

**THE WAY FORWARD: TOWARDS THE ACHIEVEMENT OF AGENDA 2030**

Building on the momentum set by the UN Women 2018 report ‘Turning promises into action: Gender equality in the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development’ (UN Women, 2018), the Global Report on Women in Tourism, the UNWTO regional congress on women’s empowerment in the tourism sector and the Freetown Forum, this chapter recommends the following.

First of all, the current scholarship on tourism and development in Africa is largely gender-neutral and skewed towards the southern and eastern sub-regions of the continent. Hence, there is the need for more and periodic tourism-related gender-sensitive research and sex-disaggregated data on both the formal and informal tourism sectors across all the
sub-regions of the continent. This will aid in the documentation of progress towards achieving gender equality and women’s empowerment.

Secondly, from a policy perspective, governments across Africa need to develop specific gender-aware tourism policy frameworks to address the peculiar needs and challenges of women’s engagement in tourism. The framework should ultimately aim at creating a growth and empowerment-oriented environment for women in the tourism space. The focus of these policies should not be narrowed down to only economic empowerment. While it is important to have deliberate policies geared at supporting women/female tourism entrepreneurship and other income-generating activities, attention must be paid to empowering women socially, psychologically and politically as well. Also, policies should be context specific. It will be erroneous to assume that women’s challenges are the same regardless of their geographical location. The unique issues posed by urban-rural dynamics should reflect in policies and actions designed to support women’s empowerment and gender equality drives.

Thirdly, it will be prudent on the part of financial institutions to design special financial products and packages for women-owned tourism-related micro- and small-scale businesses with lower collateral demands. This will help fill the gap created by the economically disadvantaged position of women that limits their ability to raise or access adequate funds to engage in tourism business in Africa. In addition, microcredit accumulation avenues like the village and saving loan (VSLA) model should be actively promoted. This is because they have been found to provide greater opportunity for promoting financial inclusion and literacy for women. Through these channels women will help to manage their business cash flow, build capital base for their businesses, access financial services and build social networks, solidarity and trust.

Fourthly, collaborative learning networks or self-help groups are crucial to women’s entrepreneurial process in tourism (e.g. Kimbu, Ngoasong, Adeola, & Afenyo-Agbe, 2019) and can play a vital role in their empowerment. Collaborative learning networks encourage collective action and make it possible for members to share and access otherwise scarce resources, knowledge, information, experience and support mobilised by the group (Woolcock, 2010). For socio-cultural and economically disadvantaged vulnerable groups like women in Africa, collaborative learning networks can be an effective capacity-building avenue for securing financial resources for business.
Again, in a patriarchal context like Africa, male support is relevant for women’s engagement in tourism, particularly in areas where there are still socio-cultural restrictions on women. As identified by Moswete and Lacey (2015), male support can be harnessed to provide mentoring, credit and emotional support to these women. Through such endeavour, the male narratives about women’s economic engagements and empowerment may change.

Furthermore, the role of training and education in advancing gender equality and women’s empowerment cannot be underestimated. Periodic training and education should be organised to augment the skill set and knowledge of women. The focus should also be on emboldening women with soft skills as well as knowledge on appropriate technology and the digitalisation of tourism. Women, particularly in rural areas, need to be supported in the quest to bridge the digital divide.

Gender-specific support centres to help address the needs of women in tourism should be created. Although, there may be gender units or agencies at country levels, their focus on achieving economic empowerment through tourism may be mere rhetoric. These new gender support centres will be expected to offer both business advisory and general support for women in tourism in terms of business registration, book-keeping, enterprise development, financing, legal advice, mentoring and coaching. Finally, gender policies can be utilised to address the gender pay gap challenge in the tourism sector. Minimum wage and equal-pay regulations should be captured in the policies, with the appropriate legal backing.

**Conclusion**

There is great potential in pursuing tourism development to achieve SDG 5 of gender equality and women’s empowerment in Africa. Whilst it is acknowledged that practices such as early marriages, gender-based crime and violence and issues relating to women’s property rights, education, health care, technology and internet pose clear challenges to the attainment of SDG 5 in Africa, gender equality and women’s empowerment drive should be considered as a process—to be achieved by taking one step at a time. Milestones achieved, no matter how small, should be celebrated and turned into lessons for advancing the cause.
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