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Examining barriers, motivations, and perceptions of women working in the tourism industry: Case study of Ayampe, Ecuador

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ABSTRACT

The notion of examining gender is gaining momentum across disciplines as an important phenomenon to understand (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2008). The tourism field is one such area that has made sizeable contributions to the literature; however there is a lack of research focusing on women and tourism in developing countries. This is an exploratory case study of a rural community in Ecuador. Using community-based research methodology and a gender and development framework, this study explores the motivations, barriers and perceptions towards women seeking employment in the tourism industry and identified disparities between the perceptions of men and women in regard to the potential for women securing employment in the industry. The themes that emerged from the data may be grouped as those indicating barriers: gender role expectations, machismo, and poor education; and as motivators: economic benefits, opportunity to learn new things, purpose in life, and education for their children.

Keywords: *community-based tourism planning, gender and development, international tourism planning*

INTRODUCTION

Recently, there have been several studies that suggest the need for a gendered perspective to examine different aspects of the tourism planning process (Apostolopoulos & Sonmez, 2001; Gibson, 2001). Further, there is a lack of research focusing on women and tourism in developing countries (Apostolopoulos & Sonmez, 2001; Casellas & Holcomb, 2001; Gibson, 2001). This study utilizes a gender and development framework (GAD) from Connelly, Li, MacDonald, and Parpart (2000) to understand the factors that affect the participation of women as tourism producers in a developing country, and to identify disparities between the perceptions of men and women in regard to the potential for women securing employment in the industry. To address the issue, an exploratory case study was conducted on a traditionally machismo

Ecuadorian community. Ayampe has a declining population of approximately 250 residents in which fishing and agriculture have historically been the main forms of employment for community members. However, with advancing technology and decreased market demand, the area has become economically depressed with little to no industry and most residents seek employment in other towns. Many residents are interested in promoting Ayampe as a tourist destination in order to gain the economic benefits associated with tourism. Furthermore, tourism development is likely to occur regardless because of improved access to the town and geographic location along a newly designated tourist route, el Ruta del Sol in the Manabí Province.

This study was initiated by the women of Ayampe who approached the researchers in December 2009 about the need for job creation and training in order to be able to become involved in the tourism workforce. They see tourism as an opportunity for them because it is the only growing industry in the community. Yet, for many of the women, it will be the first time they will have pursued work outside their homes. Therefore, community-based research (CBR) methodologies were used to study the motivations, barriers, and perceptions of women seeking employment in the tourism industry were examined through qualitative inquiry.

Significance to industry

Currently there is a lack of research elucidating the motivations and barriers of women seeking employment in the tourism industry in developing countries. Examining these factors will allow researchers to better understand employment selection choices of women and how gender issues influence participation in tourism production. Furthermore, very few studies have been conducted during the outset of changes to gender roles caused in part by tourism development and women entering into the tourism workforce. Examining these perceptions at this stage will give researchers and tourism planners more insight into issues of gender so that they may be better prepared to deal with these aspects throughout the planning process. Finally, this study contributes to the much needed research focusing on women and tourism in developing countries.

LITERATURE

Kinnaird, Kothari, and Hall (1994) suggest the importance of studying gender and tourism is because “tourism is a process that is constructed out of gendered societies and therefore all aspects of tourism-related development and activity embody gender relations” (p.5). Critical theorists have long contended that power allocation is directly related to political relations, to which they are informed by gender and other socially structured relationships (Kempadoo, 1999; Momsen & Kinnaird, 1995). In that regard, women are situated differently in their respective socio-cultural and socioeconomic environments than men and are “likely to experience tourism differently due to their position...” (Apostolopoulos & Sonmez, 2001, p. 5). This is often more intense in cultures that have residual effects of machismo and stronger patriarchal societal norms. Researchers recognize machismo to be a cultural ideology which refers to the phenomenon of male pride and exertion of masculinity and serves to explain gender interactions and acts performed by males. Typically this has been a negative power structure for women and it has the potential to inform all aspects of their lives. This being so, it impacts how the women of the community are able to participate in the tourism workforce.

Past literature shows that tourism is one of the most common means for which women first engage in work outside the household in developing countries (Gibson, 2001; Timothy, 2001), owing to the spatial fixity of the industry. Furthermore, there is research that indicates

that gender roles may be a barrier for women to work or influence the positions they take, often referred to as an extension of traditional domestic roles (Apostolopoulos & Sonmez, 2001; Casellas & Holcomb, 2001; Gibson, 2001). However, it must be recognized that there are different interpretations and expectations for gender roles among every culture and researchers must take care to assess each situation individually. Furthermore, as Timothy (2001) posited, “the role of women in tourism in developing countries is a complex phenomenon that encompasses multitudinous perspectives on gender, traditions, economic development, culture, politics, and choice” (p. 236). As a result, there may be other factors that affect participation of women in tourism. This study intends to consider all aspects influencing women’s participation, but will pay particular attention to those directly related to gender.

METHODOLOGY

This study used CBR methodology. Three focus groups were conducted during July 2010 with residents of Ayampe, Ecuador. Using purposive sampling, two focus groups were conducted with 14 female participants (six and eight per group), and one focus group consisted of 10 male participants. The gender homogenous focus groups served to create open space for discussion as well as to better illuminate differences between gender perceptions. Questions for the focus groups were piloted and refined with native Spanish speakers at the university and included six core questions with additional probing questions. The focus groups took approximately one hour each and were conducted and audio recorded in Spanish, and then translated and transcribed in English. In addition to the focus groups, participant observation methods were used over the course of a three week stay with the community and reflexive journals were kept by the investigators. Rapport had previously been developed with the community as this study is part of a larger ongoing project in the area. Member checking was achieved by the researchers completing a thematic and comparative analysis of the data independently, and converging to discuss interpretations until agreement was reached.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Several themes emerged from the data and will be discussed in brief providing select examples. Not surprisingly, gender roles expectations rose to the top of the list as barriers for working for women. It was not explicitly stated that the “gender role” was constraining, however it was reflected by numerous responsibilities the women unquestionably see as their first job. Included in these was the idea of caretaking (ethic of care) for both elders and small children. One woman stated, “I [would] like to work, the problem is that I have a small kid and I can’t go out everywhere with him...I have nobody to fix lunch for my husband and kid...”. When asked about other solutions for childcare, the women only considered a daycare business or help from other female family members as possible alternatives.

In addition to gender role expectations, the lingering attitudes of machismo were perceived to still be present by the women. The women identified a number of situations that reflected machismo and considered this to be a barrier; however, collectively they believed they could overcome it by being able to show economic benefits and be examples for other women working to persuade their husbands. One woman asserted, “I would like to work but unfortunately my husband says that he doesn’t want me to... [because] there is stuff that men like to do.” Other women discussed some of the severe consequences of beatings and separation that could occur if a man got jealous of the money his wife brought in. Conversely, the men felt that there was no more machismo left in the community and did not see it as a barrier for the

women. One man said, “well machismo is losing now and about to disappear... like if the husband hits the wife for machismo, if the wife doesn’t tell the authorities then the neighbor will.” In spite of this, casual observation during a walk through town at night, one can observe that issues of domestic abuse are still very real during the time of this study. Another reflection of lingering machismo was in regard to the indirect and passive manner to what types of positions women indicated interest in pursuing whereas the males readily knew the specific job they would ideally like to have.

The data also revealed a number of motivators for women to work outside the home. While both the men and women thought tourism could provide economic benefits, the women also saw it as an opportunity to learn something new and “to do something different “because [they] are always thinking the same things”. Several women alluded to it giving them more purpose and motivation in life. Women also appeared to be more considerate of community-oriented benefits versus individual benefits; for example, suggesting that if they learned a skill, the community would have more resources. The women also saw working as an opportunity to “own our own things”, since currently norms inhibit female money control. Education was another theme that surfaced throughout the focus groups and can be considered both a motivational factor and a barrier to the women working. It was a motivator in that all the participants believed their children’s education to be very important and remarked wanting a “better quality of life for [our] children”. Currently, the local school provides poor quality of education so families pay bus fees to send their children to neighboring schools for education. However, lack of education was also seen as a barrier for women by all the groups. The women felt that in order to work, they would need more formal and technical training and education.

The themes that emerged from the data may be grouped as those indicating barriers: gender role expectations, machismo, and poor education; and as motivators: economic benefits, opportunity to learn and do new things, purpose in life, and better education for their children. In addition, some perspective was given as to how women perceive their possible role in the industry. Some themes coincide with findings of previous studies; however, there are also some aspects raised that provide new perspectives to the literature. For example, researchers have often considered jobs taken in the tourism industry such as cooking and cleaning to be “an extension” of the domestic gender role. However, the women in this study saw these tasks as being very different from their household work and did not consider them to be the same, or even similar to what they do in their homes. Additionally, the type of work that the women were interested in included baking and selling hand-made crafts. Both the men and women saw tour guiding as a job for males.

CONCLUSION

In light of Timothy’s statement of the complexities of women in developing countries, the factors affecting participation in tourism employment went beyond gender roles and included education, internal motivation, and machismo attitudes. Implications from the findings are not intended to be generalized but can provide insight in dealing with gender issues in the tourism planning process, particularly in situations that begin to influence traditional gender roles such as women joining the workforce. Future research should explore changes in perceptions with time by conducting longitudinal studies. Gender issues in tourism development should be a major concern to tourism planners and should be addressed in early phases of tourism development. While it should not be our intention to change cultural norms, it should be recognized that changes do occur with women shifting into the tourism workforce. In summation, McGehee,

Kim and Jennings (2007) say it most succinctly, “the importance of gender in tourism, while understudied, cannot be overlooked.”

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