

Empowered Women Entrepreneurs and Sustainable Rural Tourism: A Study into the Voices and Experiences of Local Women in the Sundarbans Area of Bangladesh

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Abstract : The aim of this paper is to examine the role of women entrepreneurs in bringing about sustainable rural tourism (SRT) development in Sundarbans area of Bangladesh. Theoretically, it draws upon empowerment and entrepreneurial marketing concepts. Women entrepreneurship development and lack of empowered women as role models is an important issue for developing economies in South Asia. Despite the substantial role women play in rural economy of Sundarbans, their contribution remains overlooked as enterprises led by them are run on an informal basis and their business acumen is not taken seriously both by their families and society at large. Studies on SRT fail to engage in sufficient depth with the term applied in this paper as 'invisible women on the margins' who run their enterprises with no formal training or societal/familial support. Moreover, the link between their (non) tourism enterprise and their empowerment remains under-theorized. Thus empirically, this research seeks to fill a significant gap by focusing on a considerably under-researched Sundarbans region. Methodologically, this study follows a qualitative research design using visual ethnographic approach. Participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation are the primary data collection instruments in three coastal communities – Munshigonj, Burigoalini and Gabura – in the Sundarbans area. By focusing on the narratives of these under-investigated women, this work aims to provide in-depth and nuanced insights into salient issues on marginal communities experience from rural women's perspectives. Initial findings illustrate that the Sundarbans women have low income due to no or little education. In addition, socio-cultural and religious factors also restrict the scope of their extensive contribution to workplace. In addition, physical and social violence which is a common occurrence for these women inhibits their agency and contributes to their disempowerment.

Keywords : gender, empowerment, entrepreneurial marketing, sustainable rural tourism, Sundarbans

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