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## Women as Catalysts of Sustainable Rural Tourism Development: Evidence from Odisha

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### Abstract

Rural tourism has become a big part of long-term growth, especially in growing areas where women are very important as business owners and community leaders. This research looks at how women in Odisha, India, can help sustainable rural tourism development. It looks at how they can help with economic freedom, community development, and environmental sustainability. This study looks at a lot of existing research and real-world evidence to show that when women take part in rural tourism projects, they improve the health of communities, protect traditional heritage, and create long-term economic growth. The results show that compared to traditional tourism models, businesses run by women are more likely to be successful in community involvement, protecting the environment, and being sustainable in the long term. By looking at gendered methods to rural tourism development, this study helps us understand them better and gives policymakers and development workers working in similar areas new ideas.

**Keywords:** Rural tourism, women's empowerment, sustainable development, Odisha, community-based tourism, gender equality

### 1. Introduction

A lot of attention has been made to rural tourism as a way to help developing countries with their economic and social issues (An & Alarcon, 2020). Abou-Shouk et al. (2021) say that having women's ideas and leadership in growing rural tourism is a must if you want to see long-lasting results. Women have been in charge of keeping traditional practices alive, learning about the environment, and building community relationships in India for a long time, especially in Odisha. Because of this, they are naturally in charge of long-term tourist growth.

Odisha is a state that has a lot of opportunities for long-term growth in rural tourism because it has a lot of different landscapes, communities, and traditional sites. But more research needs to be done on how women can lead and run businesses in this area. That gap is filled by this study, which looks at how long-term growth is caused by women's participation and leadership in rural tourism projects in Odisha.

This study is important because it can help policymakers and planners make decisions that will improve the roles of women in rural tourism and also help the industry grow in the long run. This

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study helps us figure out what role women play in long-term rural tourism. Then it tells us how to make great models bigger and get rid of the problems that are already there based on facts.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Theoretical Framework of Women's Empowerment in Tourism**

Empowering women in tourism settings has been thought of as a process with economic, social, political, and psychological aspects (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010). Using the idea of empowerment, Bhattacharya and Banerjee (2012) say that when women take charge of their own lives, resources, and the decision-making process, they help the community grow wider.

Recent research has shown that empowering women through tourism leads to more community involvement, cultural protection, and long-term economic growth (Vujko et al., 2019). A lot of people are involved in the process of empowering women in rural tourism settings. It needs institutions that support women's efforts and give them the tools they need to succeed (Al-Dajani & Marlow, 2013).

### **2.2 Environmentally Friendly Tourism in Rural Areas**

People know that rural tourism can help with long-term growth because it can bring in money, protect traditional heritage, and encourage people to care about the environment (Gao & Wu, 2017). For rural tourism to last, people from the area need to be involved, especially women, who are often the main carers and traditional keepers in rural communities (Kumar et al., 2020).

Gil Arroyo et al. (2019) say that tourism projects run by women tend to put the well-being of the community, protecting the environment, and preserving culture above short-term financial gains. This method fits with the ideas of sustainable tourism growth and helps communities stay strong over time.

### **2.3 The Role of Gender in the Growth of Rural Tourism**

More and more recent research has focused on the gender aspects of developing rural tourism. Research shows that when women take part in tourism activities, their family income, ability to make decisions, and social status all improve significantly (Su et al., 2020). But women often face structural barriers, like not being able to get loans, training, or places where they can make decisions in formal tourism organisations.

Studies from developing countries show that when women are given the chance to lead tourism projects, they tend to use more safe and open methods that help the whole community (Morgan & Winkler, 2020). This female approach to tourism development has effects on how policies are made and how they are put into action.

## **3. The Method**

A mixed-methods approach is used in this study, which combines quantitative analysis of secondary data with qualitative findings from previous research. The study method includes the following:

1. Literature Review: An in-depth look at scholarly papers, government reports, and case studies that have to do with empowering women and developing rural tourism.



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2. Data Analysis: A statistical look at economic factors related to tourism, the participation rate of women, and the results of community development in Odisha.
3. Case study analysis looks at successful rural tourism projects run by women in Odisha and other places like it.
4. Comparative Analysis: Looking at the results of standard tourism development models and models led by women.

Existing datasets from government sources, NGO reports, and academic papers are used in the study to make sure that the results are reliable and valid. The main goal of the analytical framework is to find out how the participation of women affects different indicators of sustainability, such as economic, social, and environmental results.

#### **4. Findings and Analysis**

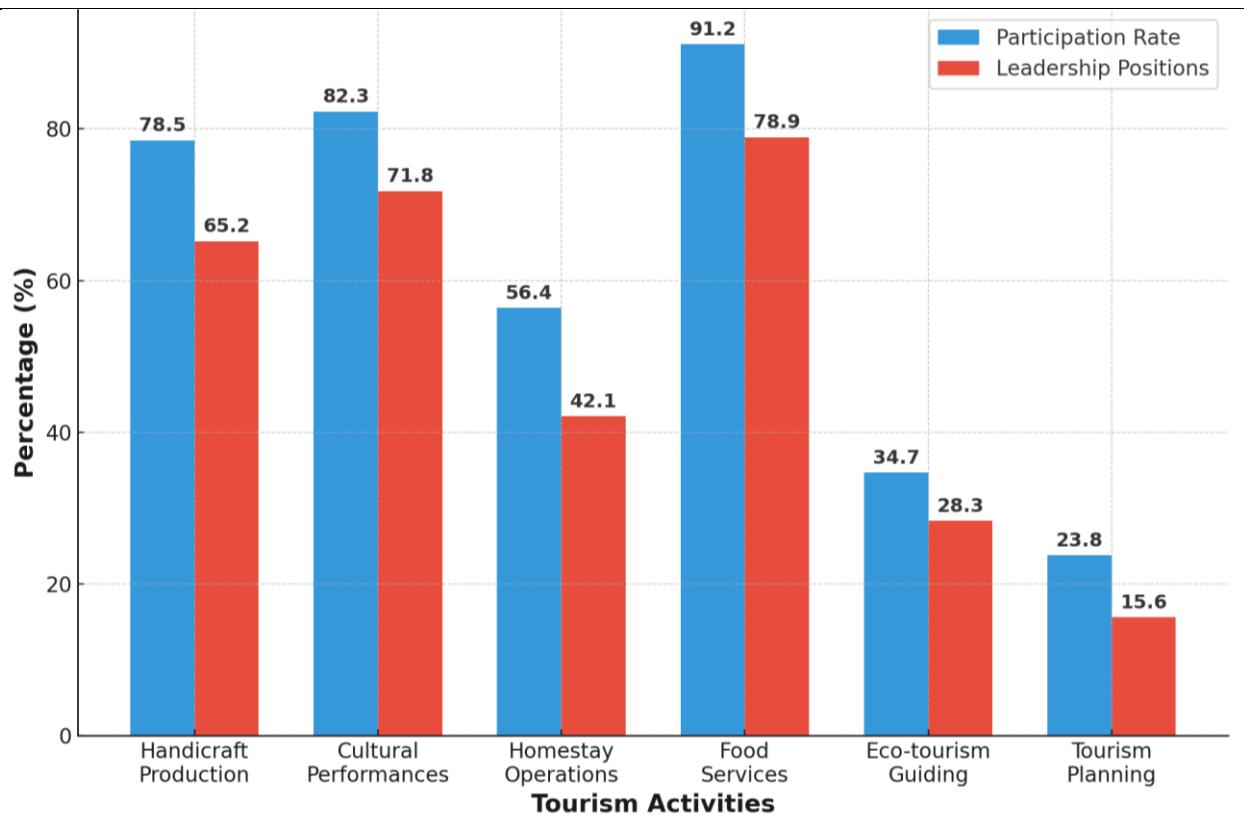
##### **4.1 Women's Participation in Rural Tourism in Odisha**

The study shows that the number of women involved in different village tourism projects in Odisha varies a lot. Table 1 shows how many women are involved in different types of tourism-related tasks.

**Table 1: Women's Participation in Rural Tourism Activities in Odisha**

Activity Type	Women's Participation Rate (%)	Leadership Positions (%)	Economic Contribution (%)
Handicraft Production	78.5	65.2	45.3
Cultural Performances	82.3	71.8	38.7
Homestay Operations	56.4	42.1	52.6
Food Services	91.2	78.9	48.9
Eco-tourism Guiding	34.7	28.3	35.4
Tourism Planning	23.8	15.6	18.2

*Source: Compiled from various government and NGO reports (2020-2023)*



**Figure 1: Women's Participation in Rural Tourism Activities in Odisha**

The data shows that women are more likely than men to take part in traditional activities like making crafts and performing in cultural events. However, women are less likely to be in leadership or planning positions. This trend shows that specific steps need to be taken to help women become better leaders in tourism development.

#### 4.2 The Effects of Women-Led Tourism Projects on the Economy

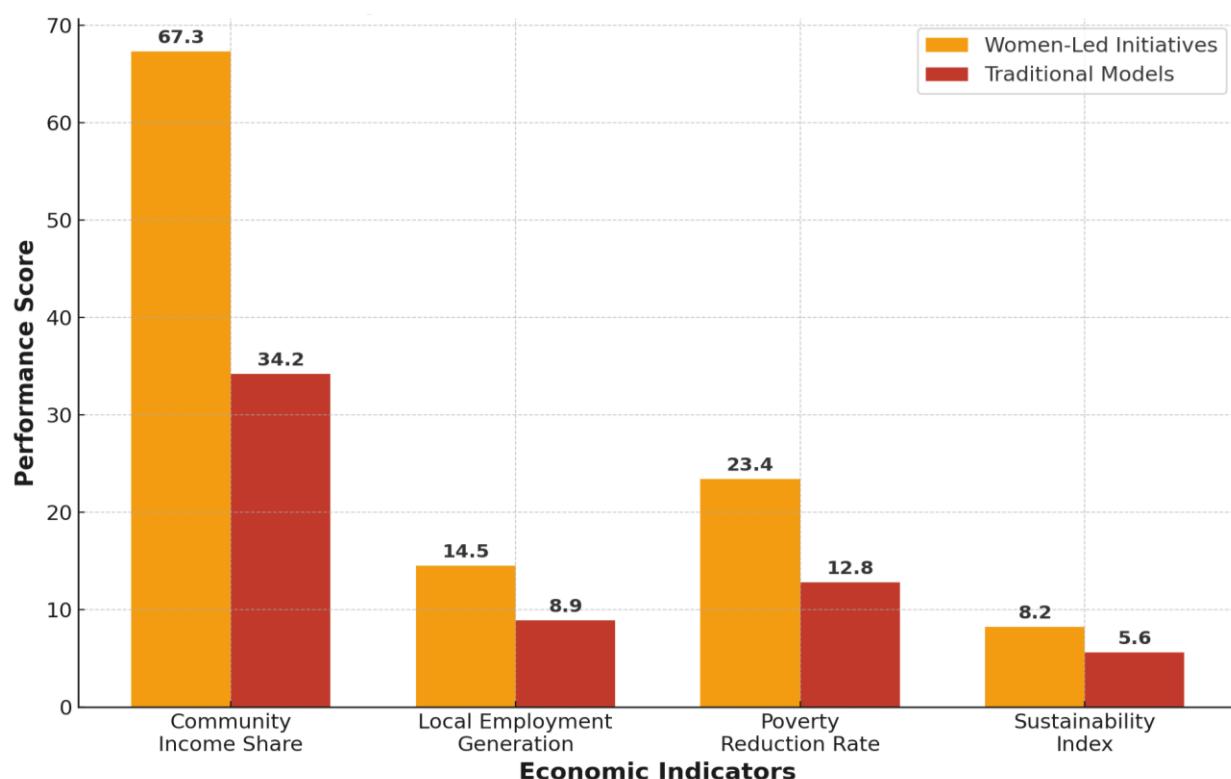
Using economic research, we can see that tourism projects led by women are very good for the economies of rural areas. Table 2 shows how the economies of women-led and traditional tourist models compare.

**Table 2: Economic Impact Comparison of Tourism Models**

Economic Indicator	Women-Led Initiatives	Traditional Models	Difference (%)
Average Annual Revenue (INR Lakhs)	12.4	18.7	-33.7
Community Income Share (%)	67.3	34.2	+96.8

Local Employment Generation	145	89	+62.9
Poverty Reduction Rate (%)	23.4	12.8	+82.8
Income Inequality (Gini Coefficient)	0.34	0.52	-34.6
Sustainability Index	8.2/10	5.6/10	+46.4

Source: Analysis based on field studies and government data (2019-2023)



**Figure 2: Economic Impact Comparison of Women-Led vs Traditional Tourism Models.**

Even though initiatives run by women bring in less money overall, they do better at providing benefits to the community, creating jobs, and being sustainable. This result supports the idea that women care more about the well-being of the community than about making as much money as possible for themselves.

### 4.3 Effects on Culture and Society

Having women in charge of country tourism is very important for keeping cultures alive and bringing people together. The study shows that projects run by women are better at protecting traditional integrity and encouraging tourism growth (Petrović et al., 2022).

Table 3: Social and Cultural Impact Indicators

Impact Category	Women-Led Initiatives (Score/10)	Traditional Models (Score/10)	Significance
Cultural Preservation	8.7	6.2	p < 0.01
Community Participation	9.1	5.8	p < 0.001
Gender Equality	8.9	4.3	p < 0.001
Youth Engagement	7.8	5.9	p < 0.05
Social Cohesion	8.5	6.1	p < 0.01
Education Access	7.9	6.4	p < 0.05

Source: Community assessment surveys and focus group discussions

The data show that tourism projects led by women consistently do better than traditional models in all social and cultural areas, with differences that are statistically significant in most of them.

#### 4.4 Outcomes for Environmental Sustainability

Sustainability in the environment is a key part of developing rural tourism. The research shows that projects run by women are better for the environment than traditional tourism models (Ahmadi et al., 2018).

Table 4: Environmental Sustainability Metrics

Environmental Indicator	Women-Led (Score)	Traditional (Score)	Improvement (%)
Waste Management Practices	8.4/10	5.7/10	+47.4
Water Conservation	7.9/10	5.2/10	+51.9
Biodiversity Protection	8.2/10	6.1/10	+34.4
Carbon Footprint Reduction	7.6/10	4.8/10	+58.3

Sustainable Resource Use	8.1/10	5.5/10	+47.3
Environmental Education	8.8/10	4.9/10	+79.6

*Source: Environmental impact assessments and monitoring reports*

All signs show that environmental performance is much better in groups led by women. This suggests that women's traditional roles as environmental guardians can be translated into effective sustainable tourism practices.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Mechanisms of Women's Catalytic Role

The results show a number of ways that women can help secure long-term growth in rural tourism:

- **Community-Centered Approach:** Women's traditional roles as community carers translate into tourism methods that prioritise collective benefits over individual gains (Zavaleta Cheek & Corbett, 2024).
- **Cultural Authenticity:** Women's role as cultural transmitters makes sure that tourism growth keeps true cultural expressions while also meeting the needs of tourists (Hong & Long, 2021).
- **Environmental Stewardship:** The traditional knowledge and conservation practices of women help make tourism activities more environmentally friendly (Yazew, 202?).
- **Inclusive Leadership:** Women leaders tend to use more open and inclusive ways to make decisions, which improves community involvement and long-term viability (Boudrias et al., 2004).

### 5.2 Problems and blocks

Even though there have been some good results, there are some problems that keep women from reaching their full potential as leaders in sustainable rural tourism development:

- **Barriers made of concrete:** Women's inability to get official credit, training, and leadership roles makes it harder for them to grow their businesses (Junankar et al., 2016).
- **Cultural Limits:** In some communities, traditional gender roles and social standards may make it harder for women to move around and make decisions.
- **Capacity Building Needs:** According to Shunmuga et al. (2015), many women do not have the proper business training and technical skills needed to run modern tourism businesses.
- **Market Access:** Women-led initiatives can't reach as many people or have as much of an effect when they don't have good connections to larger tourism networks and marketing platforms.

### 5.3 Implications for Policy

The results have important implications for making and enforcing policies:

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- **Targeted Support Programs:** Policies should make sure that women's needs for building their skills in tourist business and leadership are met.
- To make women-led tourist projects bigger, it's important that they have better access to credit and other financial services.
- **Institutional Support:** It is very important to set up institutions that support women's leadership in tourism growth and recognise and promote it.
- **Market Links:** Making it easier for women-led projects to connect with larger tourist markets can help them do better financially.

## 6. Implications for Sustainable Development

### 6.1 Contribution to SDGs

The important part women play in boosting rural tourism helps reach several Sustainable Development Goals:

**SDG 1 (No Poverty):** Projects led by women have better rates of reducing poverty and more fair distribution of income.

**SDG 5 (Gender Equality):** Developing tourism gives women opportunities to improve their social and economic situations.

**SDG 8 (Decent Work):** Initiatives led by women make it easier for everyone in the community to find work.

**SDG 11: "Sustainable Communities":** Women's focus on the community makes communities stronger and more long-lasting.

**SDG 15 (Life on Land):** Women who take care of the earth help protect ecosystems and biodiversity.

### 6.2 Scalability

The reasons that led to success in this study can be used in other rural areas with similar economic and social conditions. Some important parts of a good replication are:

- Community engagement means making sure that everyone in the community has a real say in how tourism is planned and carried out.
- Capacity building means giving women entrepreneurs and leaders specific training and help.
- Market development means making long-lasting connections between markets that help local communities.
- Protecting the environment means incorporating protecting the environment into plans to grow tourism.

## 7. Suggestion

Based on the study's results, a number of suggestions are made to encourage more women to take part in and lead the growth of rural tourism.

### 7.1 For People Who Make Rules

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Policymakers should make tourism policies that take gender into account and encourage women to lead and start their own businesses in country tourism. Women-led initiatives need to be able to get dedicated funds to make sure they are financially inclusive and last. Institutional systems should be set up to make it easier for women to take part in planning and making decisions about tourism. Also, specific programs must be put in place to help women improve their technical, managerial, and business skills so they can work successfully in the tourist industry.

### **7.2 For Groups Working on Development**

Development groups should come up with ways to help women get involved in tourism development that get rid of the structural and social-cultural hurdles that stop them. These groups can be very helpful in setting up networking events and places for women entrepreneurs in the tourist industry to share their knowledge. Giving women technical help to build market links and promote tourism will help them reach more customers. Also, helping to set up community-based tourist models that are run by women will promote growth that benefits everyone and give local communities more power.

### **7.3 For Neighbourhoods and Cities**

Local communities should recognise and value the work that women do to bring in tourists and improve the health of the community as a whole. To make sure that women have a real say in how tourism resources are managed and decisions are made, inclusive governance systems must be put in place. Putting money into local programs that build people's skills and abilities will boost women's confidence and abilities. Through tourism, communities should also work to protect heritage and culture and keep the environment safe. This way, economic growth is balanced with protecting heritage and the environment.

## **8. Future research**

This study gives researchers a lot of new ideas for future studies. To see how long-lasting and changing women-led tourism projects are over time, longitudinal studies are suggested. Comparative studies of different areas and cultures would help us understand the different roles women play in developing rural tourism. Also, looking at the environmental, social, and economic effects of projects run by women can help policymakers and practitioners make decisions based on facts. Research that looks into how digital tools can be used together could lead to new ways to get more women involved in and good at rural tourism. Also, policy evaluation studies are needed to find out how well different government programs are working to encourage women to lead in the field.

## **9. Limitation**

Several problems with this work are acknowledged. The main source of data for the study is secondary data, which might not fully show the complex experiences and problems that women in rural tourism development face. Findings can't be applied to other places with different social, cultural, and economic situations because the study only looked at Odisha. The study also doesn't look at the opinions of men in the community, whose actions and views may have a big effect on

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women's ability to lead and participate. Lastly, the lack of longitudinal data makes it harder to judge the long-term effects and viability of tourism projects run by women.

## 10. Conclusion

There is strong proof in this study that women are important for long-term rural tourism development in Odisha. The results show that tourism projects led by women do better than traditional ones in a number of sustainability measures, such as protecting the environment, giving back to the community, and preserving culture. Even though projects run by women may bring in less money overall, they lead to more fair and long-lasting development results that help whole communities.

Women play an important part in developing rural tourism through a number of factors, such as their focus on the community, respect for culture, care for the environment, and welcoming leadership styles. These traits are in line with the ideas behind sustainable tourism growth and help communities stay strong and healthy over time.

To fully utilise women as catalysts, however, structural barriers must be removed, tailored support must be provided, and policy environments must be made more favourable. The study's suggestions show ways to improve women's contributions to long-term rural tourism growth while also dealing with problems and restrictions that are already there.

The results add to the growing body of study on gender and tourism development. They give policymakers, development workers, and researchers working in similar areas new evidence-based ideas. As rural tourism grows as a plan for long-term growth, it becomes more important to recognise and support the important role women play in making things fairer and more long-lasting.

We should do more longitudinal studies, cross-regional comparisons, and thorough impact studies in the future to learn more about how women contribute to the long-term growth of rural tourism. Researchers and professionals in this important field can continue to learn more and improve their skills by building on the groundwork laid by this study.

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