

Women in Tourism: Unwto's Perspective on Gender Equality and Sustainable Growth

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the evolving role of women in global tourism through a focused content analysis of official UNWTO publications, including the Global Reports on Women in Tourism (2010 and 2019) and the associated Action Plan (2019). Using a desk-based research approach, it examines five thematic pillars central to UNWTO's gender strategy: employment, entrepreneurship, education and training, leadership and policy-making, and community participation. The analysis reveals both progress and persistent gaps in gender equality. While women make up more than half of the global tourism workforce, they continue to be underrepresented in senior leadership roles and are disproportionately concentrated in informal and low-paid employment. Despite these challenges, the reports document meaningful advancements in areas such as female entrepreneurship, digital access, and gender-sensitive policy development. The findings underscore the importance of institutional support, skills development, and inclusive governance in achieving Sustainable Development Goal 5 within the tourism sector. This study advocates for stronger implementation of UNWTO's action-oriented recommendations to make tourism a more equitable and sustainable industry for women worldwide.

Keywords: Gender Equality, Women in Tourism, Sustainable Development Goals, UNWTO, Women Empowerment.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a dynamic global industry and a vital source of employment and entrepreneurship, especially for women. Across many destinations, women comprise the majority of the tourism workforce, yet they often remain concentrated in low-wage, informal, or seasonal roles. Their representation in leadership positions and policy-making bodies continues to be limited, and gender pay disparities persist.

The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), in alignment with Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality) and Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), has emphasized the need to mainstream gender equality across tourism policies and practices. Its global reports and frameworks serve as both diagnostic tools and strategic roadmaps for promoting women's empowerment in tourism.

This study draws exclusively on official UNWTO publications to explore the global discourse and recommendations related to women's empowerment in the tourism sector. It aims to evaluate progress made since the baseline report of 2010, identify persistent challenges, and highlight key policy directions outlined in subsequent publications. The discussion is structured around five recurring thematic pillars

that UNWTO has identified as critical to women's advancement in tourism: employment, entrepreneurship, education and training, leadership and policy-making, and community participation.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Tourism offers significant opportunities for women's economic and social empowerment, yet persistent gender inequalities remain a challenge across global contexts. Several studies have emphasized that participation in tourism enhances women's independence, self-confidence, and status within families and communities—especially in developing regions like Turkey and India (Çiçek et al., 2017; Rinaldi & Salerno, 2020). Moreover, women's entrepreneurship in tourism has been shown to promote sustainable development and community resilience, particularly in the Arab world and Asia (Abou-Shouk et al., 2021; Wang & Sun, 2022).

However, gender disparities persist. Women are overrepresented in low-wage, part-time, and informal jobs, while being underrepresented in management and leadership roles. These trends are observed in regions such as the Caribbean, APEC countries, and Southern Europe (Freund & Hernandez, 2021; Hutchings et al., 2020; Pastore & Webster, 2020). Structural barriers, workplace discrimination, and traditional gender norms continue to restrict women's advancement (Elshaer et al., 2021; Hutchings et al., 2020).

Support systems such as women's professional networks and targeted HR strategies are key to advancing gender equality in tourism (Freund & Hernandez, 2021). Tourism involvement has also been identified as a mediating factor linking empowerment and sustainability, particularly in conservative settings like Saudi Arabia (Elshaer et al., 2021).

Nonetheless, there are clear gaps in the existing literature. Much of the research remains qualitative and geographically limited, with a need for broader, more comparative studies that integrate diverse theoretical perspectives (Efthymiadou & Farmaki, 2023).

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative content analysis approach, relying solely on secondary data drawn from official publications of the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and few academic publications. The analysis is designed to explore the organization's evolving perspective on gender equality and women's empowerment in the tourism sector.

The primary sources used for this research include:

- Global Report on Women in Tourism – First Edition (2010)
- Global Report on Women in Tourism – Second Edition (2019)
- Action Plan on Women in Tourism – Second Edition (2019)

These documents were selected due to their global scope, alignment with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and their exclusive focus on gender-related issues in tourism. The content of these reports encompasses both statistical data and qualitative insights, along with case studies, best practices, and policy frameworks, making them suitable for a comprehensive thematic analysis.

The analytical framework was developed based on five thematic pillars identified and consistently applied across the UNWTO reports. These include:

Employment - patterns in women's participation, working conditions, wage disparities, and informal sector vulnerabilities.

Entrepreneurship – opportunities and barriers in women's tourism-related enterprises, market access,

and financial inclusion.

Education and Training – availability and quality of education, vocational training, and digital skills development for women in tourism.

Leadership and Policy-making – representation of women in high-level tourism governance and the integration of gender considerations into national and institutional policies.

Community and Civil Society – women's participation in grassroots tourism initiatives, cooperatives, and civil society networks.

The study involved a systematic review of the full-text documents to identify key findings, recommendations, case examples, and gaps related to each thematic area. Codes and categories were developed inductively, using recurring themes and patterns in the documents as analytical markers. No fieldwork, primary data collection, or stakeholder interviews were conducted as the scope of the study was intentionally limited to a desk-based review of existing, authenticated UNWTO sources.

This method ensures a focused and comparative understanding of how gender equality in tourism has evolved over time and how international policy guidance has shifted in response to global development priorities.

FINDINGS AND THEMATIC DISCUSSION

This section presents a thematic synthesis of key findings based on UNWTO's recurring analytical pillars: employment, entrepreneurship, education and training, leadership and policy-making, and community participation. Each area reveals both progress and persistent challenges in advancing gender equality in the tourism sector.

Employment: Women represent a significant share—54%—of the global tourism workforce, compared to just 39% across the broader economy. However, their participation remains concentrated in low-wage, part-time, and informal roles. The gender pay gap in tourism is 14.7%, slightly lower than the global average of 16.8%, yet still indicative of systemic inequality. Many women remain excluded from formal employment structures and social protections, making them especially vulnerable in times of crisis or economic downturn. Addressing decent work standards and closing wage gaps is central to achieving SDG 8 in the tourism sector.

Entrepreneurship: While entrepreneurship has emerged as a key pathway for women's empowerment in tourism, barriers persist—including limited access to markets, finance, digital tools, and diversified product development. Women-led businesses often cluster around cultural or craft-based products, which are highly saturated and yield limited growth potential. The UNWTO's reports cite examples from Latin America, where women's cooperatives are increasingly entering Agri-tourism and rural supply chains as a strategy to diversify income and contribute to sustainable local development. Still, support systems and policy incentives are needed to help women scale their enterprises beyond the informal sector.

Education and Training: Women are overrepresented in tourism education, particularly at vocational and entry-level stages. However, there is a significant gap in digital literacy, leadership development, and soft skills training. This mismatch limits women's upward mobility within the sector. UNWTO recommends targeted training in information and communication technologies (ICTs), as well as leadership and innovation skills, to prepare women for decision-making roles and high-value entrepreneurial opportunities.

Leadership and Policy: Leadership remains a major gap in gender equality. As of 2018, only 23% of tourism ministers worldwide were women, reflecting their underrepresentation in policy and

governance. Countries with women in top tourism roles tend to score higher on the Political Empowerment Index, suggesting a correlation between gender-inclusive leadership and broader development outcomes. The UNWTO's Action Plan urges national tourism bodies to adopt gender-inclusive institutional strategies, set representation targets, and mainstream gender into policy frameworks to close this leadership gap.

Community and Civil Society: At the grassroots level, women often take the lead in community-based tourism initiatives, cooperatives, and informal networks. These efforts frequently result in stronger community cohesion, cultural preservation, and economic resilience. However, such roles are often unrecognized, underfunded, or socially contested. The reports emphasize the importance of intersectionality—recognizing how gender interacts with other forms of identity and marginalization—and call for collaborations with NGOs, unions, and civil society organizations to amplify women's voices and ensure equitable participation in local tourism governance.

POLICY ACTION PLAN OVERVIEW

The UNWTO Action Plan on Women in Tourism – Second Edition (2019) presents a structured roadmap to address systemic gender inequalities in the tourism sector. It emphasizes practical, implementable strategies aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (particularly SDG 5 and SDG 8). The plan identifies four priority areas for action:

Tackling Pay Gaps and Harassment

The Action Plan highlights persistent wage disparities and gender-based harassment as major obstacles to achieving equality in the tourism workforce. It recommends:

- Conducting wage gap assessments and encouraging equal pay audits in tourism organizations.
- Strengthening anti-harassment frameworks, including zero-tolerance policies, confidential reporting systems, and gender-sensitive workplace training.
- Supporting unions and HR departments in developing tools for addressing complaints and promoting safe work environments for all employees.

Increasing Digital Inclusion

Women in tourism, particularly in rural and developing regions, often face limited access to digital tools and platforms. The Action Plan urges:

- Expansion of gender-responsive ICT training, especially for women entrepreneurs and youth.
- Enhanced access to e-commerce platforms, mobile applications, and online tourism marketing tools.
- Public-private partnerships to bridge the digital divide and ensure women's inclusion in the digital tourism economy.

Encouraging Formalization of Women-Run Businesses

Many women-led tourism enterprises remain informal, preventing access to finance, regulation, and institutional support. The plan advocates:

- Simplified business registration procedures tailored to small and home-based tourism ventures.
- Microfinance schemes, grant support, and start-up incentives for women entrepreneurs.
- Mentoring networks and incubators to help scale women-led tourism businesses into the formal economy.

Institutionalizing Gender Policies in Tourism Governance

To ensure long-term and systemic change, the Action Plan calls for the mainstreaming of gender equality in tourism governance structures, including:

- Mandating gender equality strategies within national tourism boards, ministries, and destination management organizations.
- Setting clear representation targets for women in tourism leadership positions.
- Integrating gender impact assessments into tourism policy development, budgeting, and evaluation processes.

These policy areas, if systematically implemented, have the potential to create more inclusive, resilient, and equitable tourism systems. They also align directly with UNWTO's broader vision of making tourism a driver of inclusive and sustainable development.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

The advancement of women in tourism has direct and measurable implications for sustainable development, particularly in relation to Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality) and Sustainable Development Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). When women are empowered through fair employment, access to leadership, and entrepreneurial opportunities, the tourism sector becomes not only more equitable but also more resilient and innovative.

Evidence from UNWTO reports indicates that gender-inclusive tourism systems contribute to stronger local economies, enhance social cohesion, and promote more representative governance. Involving women in decision-making, particularly at the community level, leads to more responsible tourism practices, diversified offerings, and culturally sensitive development strategies. Women-led initiatives in community-based tourism also foster inclusive economic participation and sustainability through resource stewardship, heritage preservation, and cooperative business models.

The UNWTO Action Plan on Women in Tourism should be viewed as a strategic reference point for governments, tourism ministries, and destination management organizations. Its actionable recommendations—ranging from digital inclusion to institutional reforms—offer a practical blueprint for aligning national tourism policies with global sustainability goals. By adopting such frameworks, stakeholders can ensure that tourism contributes not only to economic growth, but also to inclusive social development and gender equity.

LIMITATIONS

This study is based exclusively on desk-based content analysis of published UNWTO reports and action plans. As such, it does not incorporate primary field data, interviews, or case observations that might offer deeper contextual insights into women's lived experiences in tourism across specific countries or communities.

Additionally, while the UNWTO publications provide valuable global perspectives and highlight regional trends, there remains a notable scarcity of gender-disaggregated tourism data at the national and sub-national levels. This limits the ability to evaluate how effectively policies are being implemented on the ground or how outcomes differ across cultural and socio-political contexts.

The study's scope is also limited to global-level policy guidance, without engaging in country-specific policy analysis or empirical validation. As a result, while the findings reflect international trends and recommendations, they may not fully capture the diversity of barriers and opportunities encountered by women in specific geographic or institutional settings.

CONCLUSION

Between 2010 and 2019, significant progress has been made in recognizing and documenting the role of women in tourism, largely driven by the efforts of the UNWTO and its partners. The evolution from the baseline Global Report in 2010 to the 2019 report and Action Plan reflects a growing commitment to gender equality, not only in rhetoric but also in measurable outcomes and policy frameworks.

Nonetheless, tourism's transformative potential for gender equality remains underutilized. Women continue to face structural disadvantages, particularly in leadership, formal employment, and digital access. The sector holds untapped capacity to become a vehicle for inclusive development—empowering women as leaders, entrepreneurs, educators, and innovators.

For this transformation to materialize, sustained political will, ongoing data monitoring, inclusive education and training programs, and the adoption of gender-sensitive policies are essential. The UNWTO's Action Plan offers a practical framework for integrating these elements into tourism development strategies worldwide. Moving forward, aligning tourism governance with gender equity objectives is not only a moral imperative, but also a strategic step toward building a more sustainable, inclusive, and resilient tourism industry.

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