Empowering Women through Tourism Development

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Introduction:

On women empowerment, Honourable President of India Mr. Pranab Mukherjee on his recent visit to Odisha cited the example of freedom fighter Maa Ramadevi’s three ‘Es’ (Education, Emancipation and Empowerment) for development of women of the country.

The empowerment is a much debated issue in present scenario in all walks of human life. In most developing countries, gender inequality and discrimination is a major impediment for development. In order to achieve the millennium development goals in 2015 one of the most important aspects will be, to try to abolish the gap between women and men in terms of capacities, access to resources and opportunities, and vulnerability to violence and conflict. One of the aspects in which gender (inequalities) issues can play an important role is tourism development (UNWTO, 2006). Regarding the fact that many tourism studies has a crucial link between tourism, community development and women empowerment, thus UN has committed to create an important political agenda to research and work on issues in this area. That is why the UNWTO presented an Action Plan related to women empowerment through tourism in the last ITB in Berlin. The Action Plan focuses on poverty reduction and the enhancement of women’s dignity and role in the work place (UNWTO, 2006)

The empowerment is a broader dimension which entails the critical aspect of gender equality in society where men and women avail the same opportunities, outcomes, rights, and obligations in every spheres of their daily chores. In this cut throat era of globalisation, though the world is changing and making improvement rapidly, but still the concerns arose for the rural women as they are leading a life of dependency which leads the poor socio economic status disabling them for the future upliftment. One of the genuine aspects of women empowerment is the gender equality with a focus on identifying and monitoring the power and basic elementary right affording women more autonomy to manage their lives in daily basis. Empowering women is a national issue which could be sorted out by many means and ways in government level, bureaucratic level and societal level, but a new emerging concept which has long been discussed for empowerment of women is tourism. As tourism is linked to the sustainable development and realization of human rights, the best interest of women empowerment can be achieved by tourism. Tourism is one of the broader sectors where the involvement of women through community participation can fetch
many positive impacts in terms of socio economic cultural and sustainable development of the locals and enhances the control of power in particular destination or region. The active involvement of women from rural and urban areas in tourism makes them able to stand on their own feet and strengthen their economy and education.

Tourism in local, regional and international level in each and every country has come forwarded collaborately with the lives of poor and destitute women in order to enhance their economic prospect and to increase their self esteem. The govt of different countries through the tourism action plan has initiated and implemented many tourism projects to support women empowerment through skill development programme to make them employable and survivable for future generation. Not much research work has been carried on women empowerment through tourism, but there are some distinct forms of tourism like rural tourism, ethnic tourism tribal and eco tourism where women empowerment can be achieved successfully. The women empowerment ultimately restores the local tradition and culture, brings into the limelight the old and pristine handicrafts, the cuisine and also saves the forest and balances the eco system of the mother earth. For an example Gupta & Shah’s (1999) present a case, where women in Himachal Pradesh, India took advantage of the tourism industry’s reliance on beautiful stable mountainsides, to mobilize resistance against deforestation. The women’s courage to innovatively earn from tourism is testimony to how tourism creates spaces for psychological and social women empowerment. This example reveals how women, if given chance, are able to make decisions, own processes but also contribute to environmental management while obtaining incomes, which in other terms represent sustainable development. Wearing and Larsen (1996: 119) are positive about the potential of ecotourism to promote community development, stating that ecotourism can empower local communities by giving them a sense of pride and awareness of the importance of their natural resources and control over their own development. In many cases women have a close connection with the physical environment of their community. Maasai women, for example, have special knowledge of walking routes, craft production and useful plants, all of which can be related to the development of tourism products and services (van der Cammen, 1997). In such context it would seem logical that these women will get involved in managing tourism projects. Ghodsee (2003) argues that assisting economic sectors like tourism employing large percentage of women at comparatively high wages will help improve the relative economic well-being of women. In other cases however, in terms of formal employment, local women are often overlooked when lodges and other tourist sites are developed. According to the UNWTO, women make up the majority of the tourism workforce, but that they tend to be in the lowest paid, sometimes even un-paid, and lowest status jobs. In order to promote gender equality, support opportunities for women and end violence against women, it is important to empower women as a first step. The tourism industry can contribute to this effort by creating opportunities for women and spread awareness of gender issues. Having economic opportunities and education is one of the most important ways for women to empower themselves to seek a better quality of life for themselves, their families and their communities. After analyzing the academic literature on women empowerment in tourism, it is also useful to look at the more practical implications of it. During a conference in Berlin in March 2008 the United Nations World Travel Organization (UNWTO)
implemented an Action Plan to Empower Women through Tourism (Travel Daily News, 2008). The objectives of the plan are derived from the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, which aims at benefitting poor (also through tourism), protect the environment and empower women. Tourism is an important part of world’s GDP (more then 10%) and creates around 8% of world’s employment. Of all people employed in the tourism sector 60-70% are women (UNWTO, 2008). It offers many opportunities to both developed and developing countries in rural, urban, regional or cultural areas. Tourism development can be a great incentive for development and thus for the empowerment of women, which makes the plan of the WTO a reasonable motivation to empower women through this sector. Despite many international agreements that were organized to evaluate and improve the rights of women UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund) claims ‘they are still much more likely than men to be poor, malnourished and illiterate. They usually have less access than men to medical care, property ownership, credit, training and employment. They are far less likely than men to be politically active and far more likely to be victims of domestic violence’ (UNFPA, 2008). The empowerment of women could therefore significantly contribute to reaching gender equality. The UN defines empowerment as a critical aspect of gender equality, and defines both concepts as following (UNFPA, 2008): ‘Gender equality implies a society in which women and men enjoy the same opportunities, outcomes, rights and obligations in all spheres of life. Equality between men and women exists when both sexes are able to share equally in the distribution of power and influence; have equal opportunities for financial independence through work or through setting up businesses; enjoy equal access to education and the opportunity to develop personal ambitions. A critical aspect of promoting gender equality is the empowerment of women, with a focus on identifying and redressing power imbalances and giving women more autonomy to manage their own lives. Women’s empowerment is vital to sustainable development and the realization of human rights for all. Tourism is seen as one of many tools that can contribute to the achievement of the women empowerment. The strength of tourism is that it can help to improve livelihoods by alleviating poverty, ensure or improve environmental sustainability, and promote gender equality and empower women. Though the world has developed drastically but still woman has not yet levelled their shoulder with male counterpart in terms of legal, social and economical rights. This gender gap influences control of resources, political voice, in economic opportunities, and power relations. Ultimately, the cost of these inequalities creates many social obligations.

**Increasing power and control over natural resources:**

Women from the very old age are usually in charge of keeping water, food and fuel and overseeing the household chores and family health and nutrition. For this reason, they tend to put in practice whatever they have learned about preserving the environment and natural resources. Tourism development could be a tool to introduce environmental conscious practices within livelihoods by stressing the importance of conservation and sustainable practices within the environment, so that it can function as any kind of tourism supply and thus as a new income generator. Further, by learning and improving techniques of crop planting and other types of production, women can become suppliers within the value chain production for the tourism market.
Economic empowerment:

More women than men live in poverty (UNFPA, 2008). After toiling hard the woman gets lower priority and sometimes remain unpaid. So those women face the discrimination in the economic sphere every day, and sometimes struggle for some economic independence. The tourism initiates to narrow down the gap between men and women in the economic sphere, for instance through empowerment by micro-credit programmes, woman Self Help Group(SHG) could greatly contribute to improving gender equality. Tourism can function as an instrument for economic empowerment by opening up new markets for small and medium enterprises by proper skill development programme.

Educational empowerment:

About two thirds of the illiterate adults in the world are females (UN, 2008). The level of education is unreachable to the women in different regions which cause the infant mortality and malnourishment. Also the lack of education hinders the growth and development for their offspring. Tourism can be used as a sector where women from all hierarchies in society, with all types of educational background, can be trained and educated for certain skills within the tourism industry. Women can be engaged in different forms of creative entrepreneurship which gives women a whole range of skills like speaking different languages, hospitality skills, guiding tourists, managing project and so on for employment opportunities.

Political empowerment:

Still there is a wide gap between men and women in many social and legal institutions, where the voices raised by the women are neglected. This badly influences the quality and implementation of their basic human rights, the access and control over land, in employment and earnings, and in participation in decision making processes in general. But tourism affords a wide spectrum of opportunities by including women in the planning and organizational process, with the aim of giving them a voice in the process.

Conclusion

Tourism industry is one of the important sources for empowering women. In India, tourism industry is contributing much in the women’s empowerment. Women in most hi-tech and underdeveloped states, both skilled and unskilled, are actively involved in the tourism sector and its decision making. The economic empowerment of women through tourism can be well judged by the percentage share of women workforce in tourism sectors of India. The total percentage share of women employees in tourism sector is 34, which is higher than the total percentage of women workforce than any other sector. Apart from direct employment through tourism, women are also indirectly engaged in tourism related activities like hotels, restaurants, cafeterias, small and medium enterprises (SMEs), various household businesses, tea stalls, travels, handlooms and handicrafts etc. They are employed and have occupied a noticeable position in different regions of country.

India is gifted with natural beauty and resources, therefore, there is a further potential in the tourism industry. With the increasing inflows of more tourists the employment opportunity will also increase. Hence, there are more possibilities for empowerment of women and that too at a very low investment in tourism industry. Tourism is a service oriented, labor intensive and multi-dimensional sector which is linked with many other sectors of the economy like transportation, hotels,
restaurants, travels and tour businesses, seasonal home, etc. and provide a larger opportunity for employment. Therefore, there is wide scope for women’s empowerment in both formal and informal sectors of tourism industry.

References:

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