1. Background

Although tourism is a vital platform for women employment and entrepreneurial opportunities, tourism employment depicts a mixed picture of women empowerment and exploitation\(^1\). For one, women comprise of 54% of tourism workforce but are under-represented in management roles and earn 14.7% less than men (Global Report on Women in Tourism Second Edition). This gender inequality has been exacerbated by COVID-19 – the global crisis has had the most devastating and unprecedented impact on the tourism industry. Given that women make up more than half of the tourism workforce, the COVID-19 pandemic has also impacted women disproportionately. In addition, women are over-represented in part-time, casual and seasonal jobs and likely to experience exploitations and poor working conditions \(^2\). The women in tourism who are in low-skilled or informal work will have less access to social protection and this puts them in a precarious position during a pandemic. While women are at the front line of COVID-19 response as healthcare workers, innovators and leaders, their contributions remain less visible and less valued than men’s. In Asia and the Pacific, gender inequalities vary across cultures and traditions to affect women in tourism, so that the catastrophic effects of the pandemic were felt more acutely by women, from loss of jobs to rise in violence against women and unpaid care work.

As countries take tentative steps to restart tourism, and in an attempt to address the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5 (to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls), UNWTO

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will be organising its first *Regional Conference on the Empowerment of Women in Tourism in Asia and the Pacific* in collaboration with the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture of Malaysia. It will take place in hybrid format in Kuala Lumpur from 16-17 November 2021. This conference has been designed to move the production of tourism knowledge away from neo-colonialism and long-held conference structures that privileged men.

2. **Conference Objectives**

The following are the main objectives of this regional conference:

1. To evaluate the extent to which COVID-19 has contributed to worsening the socio-economic situation of women among the tourism workforce in the Asia-Pacific region.
2. To facilitate a policy dialogue to raise awareness and shape better policies that create opportunities for women to benefit from tourism development.
3. To explore ways to improve the working conditions and career progression of women employees in tourism in order to build resilience for crisis situations (such as COVID-19) that cause high unemployment.
4. To exchange good practices and improve the enabling environment for enhancing women’s employment in the tourism sector.

3. **Thematic areas of the conference**

The conference will focus on 4 thematic areas based on the UNWTO Action Plan on Women in Tourism in the context of the impact of COVID-19 on the women in tourism labour force.

The provisional areas of focus are:

- Tourism recovery policies through a gendered lens
- Women’s employment and leadership
- Education and training for the realities of post-COVID19 tourism
- Data and statistics for an inclusive recovery

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4. Methodology
The methodology for the conference recognises the structural gender inequality for women in tourism but is also deliberate in considering the intersection of, and the mutually constitutive relations between gender and other social identities such as ethnicity. The criticality of the conference lies in its feminist agenda to advance socio-economic changes for women in tourism.

As such, 4 main sessions are planned to centre on the 4 thematic areas of the conference. 2 will be held on the first day and the other 2 on the second day. Each of these 4 one-hour sessions will consist of between three and four panelists and a moderator. Altogether, between 9 and 12 speakers will be featured during the four main sessions.

To complement the 4 sessions, 5 enrichment sessions are designed into the conference to add practical value to the participants. While the 4 main sessions may disseminate knowledge and techniques for long term management strategies and policy change, the 5 enrichment sessions serve as more practical, direct, active and immediate methods for activating change. These 5 sessions will be run by 4 facilitators, 1 emcee and 2 to 3 visual story-tellers.