Technical Note

Regional Conference on the Empowerment of Women in Tourism in Asia and the Pacific
Women-led Initiatives shaping the future of Inclusive and Sustainable Tourism
2-4 May 2024
Bali International Convention Centre of The Westin Resort Nusa Dua, Bali, Indonesia

I. Background

With a participation of over 54% in tourism workforce, women play a critical role in the impact of the sector on global economic, social, and environmental landscapes. The sector often attracts more women due to lower and often flexible barriers to entry, with the nature of work being an extension to the domestic roles, allowing women to blend their work and life according to sociocultural expectations.

This is showcased in data demonstrating higher proportion of female tourism ministers at a global level (23%) in comparison to the proportion of women ministers overall (20.7%). Additionally, research shows that women’s involvement in the tourism industry not only contributes more to environmental sustainability, but also has a deep impact on the social and economic sustainability of the region. However, these points of flexibility and blurred lines between domestic and professional work often places women in a disadvantageous position. This is showcased by data that in gender pay parity in tourism women earn 14.7% less than men in similar roles.

As tourism sector returns to its pre-pandemic levels, it is important to acknowledge the contributions made by women in the tourism sector while mapping the plan of action ahead grounded in collaboration and partnerships. To underscore both objectives, UN Tourism and the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy of Indonesia, are organizing the 2nd Regional Conference on the Empowerment of Women in Tourism in Asia and the Pacific, in collaboration with Bali Tourism Polytechnic. The two-day conference will take place in the in-person format at Bali International Convention Center (BICC), Westin, Nusa Dua, Bali from 2-3 May 2024.
II. Panel briefs

The conference hosts 4 panel discussions involving different stakeholders within tourism, including educators, ministers, public and private industry professionals.

**Women Ministers’ Roundtable Discussion: Women in Tourism Industry Leadership: Highlighting the achievements and challenges women face as leaders in the tourism sector.**

Leadership has traditionally been understood and propagated to be a male-dominated role with requirements of masculine characteristics. This understanding is further propagated by beliefs surrounding the ‘natural’ behaviors of men and women in the larger social structure, where men are attributed with characteristics like assertiveness, decision-making, and achieving objectives in contrast to women are correlated with features of caring, nurturing, and balancing. The difference in attribution of personality characteristics of men and women is evident from the recent job profile analysis of people in senior leadership positions, where it was found that women were evaluated strongly on their attitudinal skills in comparison to men, setting the ground that women’s attitudes are more important than their skills when compared to men. Reports show that this understanding of role differences is exacerbated in Asia and the Pacific due to the sociocultural structure, as most women are supposed to prioritize family and care work rather than their careers. As such, women are typically expected to ‘support’ the leadership roles rather than be in them.

However, in recent times, leadership research and discussion have shifted their focus to discussing how, despite all the challenges posed to women, they showcase better decision-making over time. Specifically, research shows that countries where more women are involved in governance reflect a higher level of equity in policymaking, paving the path for a gender-equal society. It has also been found that having more women in leadership roles often translates to increased environmental sustainability initiatives. Furthermore, research also shows that women leaders also contribute to the empowerment of more women via increased investment in capacity building and gender awareness.

Therefore, it makes it critical to understand how women leaders can drive change in the tourism sector across the region. It is more critical to map the role of women leaders in tourism within Asia and the Pacific because this region has higher representation of women in the tourism workforce in comparison to the global involvement of women in the broader economy. Considering the necessary shift of discussion, this panel of women ministers from across the region will aim to highlight the achievements of participating countries in ensuring increased gender equality and women’s empowerment while acknowledging the challenges faced in the execution of policies.
Panel 1: Sustainable and Inclusive Tourism: Discussing women's roles in promoting sustainable tourism.

The United Nations General Assembly emphasizes ‘the need to optimize the economic, social, cultural and environmental benefits stemming from sustainable tourism’. In the tourism sector, sustainability measures are frequently contextualized around environmental aspects. These are seen in initiatives which lead to a lesser impact on the environment such as lowering the carbon footprint of activities, reducing plastic usage and showing respect for natural places, often with women at the forefront of such efforts.

While attention to the environmental aspect of sustainability is important and needed, there is often less focus on social sustainability. Additionally, research has pointed out that no solid change towards environmental concerns can be achieved without addressing associated social aspects of equality and role distribution within different sectors.

An important aspect of social sustainability in the tourism sector is the role played by women. Research has shown how the involvement of women leads to the magnification of all three aspects of sustainability through lower environmental impact, increased economic opportunities for more women, and higher gender equality in society.

Tourism is one of the only sectors across which employs has more women than men at a global level (54%), which makes it more important to discuss the role played by women in the sector. Contextualizing the definition of social sustainability in the sector would mean increased opportunities for women while ensuring their well-being and durable involvement. These aspects of social sustainability and women also correlate with SDGs 5 (Gender Equality), 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and 10 (Reduced Inequalities).

Therefore, it is important to discuss the role played by women in sustainability within the region. Ensuring that women are fully involved with tourism planning and development can lead to a greater emphasis on sustainable and responsible tourism practices. Given that Asia and the Pacific have over 50% of women in the tourism workforce, it is critical to understand how women can ensure the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Thus, this panel is led by women in the tourism industry who are bringing social sustainability and business together to ensure a sustainable change in tourism for good.

Panel 2: From the classroom to the boardroom: Examining how education and training impact women's participation in the tourism sector.

The high participation of women in the tourism sector is in part thanks to lower barriers to entry in terms of education and training. This has been studied with research providing evidence of a higher participation of women in tourism activities as roles played by them in the sector are an extension of their domestic duties. However, this extension and other limitations on the participation of women in the sector also force them to stay in low-paying, repetitive, and non-managerial roles.

This limited participation of women and their restriction to roles that are the extension of their social duties can be addressed by investment in their education and training. While
investment in education and training increased during the pandemic, transcending the social and geographical barriers, reports showed that education-to-execution challenges for women in Asia and the Pacific remain prevalent.

These challenges are exacerbated by the ‘gendered’ nature of education, where certain streams, such as tourism, are deemed to be more suitable for women than for men. This gendered nature of education and training leads to a lower transfer of skills from the classroom to the workplace, making their participation superficial rather than meaningful. This reinforcement of stigma and lesser importance to women’s careers is also evident from the comparison of the percentage of women enrolled in tourism programs versus those who hold managerial or supervisory positions in the sector, which is less than one-fourth.

These challenges call for discussion of the education and training of women in the tourism sector. In line with SDGs 4 (Quality Education), 5 (Gender Equality), 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and 17 (Partnerships for the Goals), this panel aims to discuss how education and training can lead women to become sustainable champions within the sector.

Led by educators and trainers from the region who are also experts on gender and inclusion, this panel will highlight how classrooms can be transformed into a space for growth, capacity building and addressing social stigma. Specifically, panelists will share examples of best practice that have allowed them to negotiate beyond the sociocultural understanding of roles played by women and how training can assist in the creation of a more inclusive tourism sector.

Panel 3: Safety and Accessibility: Addressing concerns related to safety and creating more accessible travel opportunities for women.

Women have been multidimensional contributors to the tourism sector, ranging from entrepreneurs to travellers. Research shows that women are significant contributors to the travel market and make up to 70% of travel decisions within families and social circles. While limited gender-segregated statistics are available for the region, countries like Japan report 83.5% of women contributing to the tourism sector as entrepreneurs.

However, these statistics of high contribution are contrasted with gender-based violence and the perceived threat that women feel during travel. Multiple research studies show how women’s travel experiences and choices are determined by their perception of harassment and physical harm during their travel. With a high number of sexual harassment complaints, research shows that women have to negotiate their safety within the tourism workplaces as well. In times when tourism structures do not constrain women, they are often bound by social ones, where travel is actively discouraged unless accompanied by a male member. These challenges are exacerbated in cases where travellers are in need of accessibility accommodations.

Women who have a disability or specific access requirements face additional challenges to equal participation in tourism. The benefits of improving the accessibility of tourism for women can be huge as some of the leading female voices in accessible tourism will explore in this panel detailing initiatives they have spearheaded to help open up tourism services and products to the estimated 1.3 billion people worldwide who experience significant disability. Such improvements, benefit all women in local communities and visitors alike, with or without disability and can pay substantial financial dividends.
Panellists in this discussion will share their perspectives and experiences of creating and participating in spaces that empower more women to travel.

III. Conclusions and Recommendations

The 2nd Regional Conference on the Empowerment of Women in Tourism in Asia and the Pacific aims to advance the dialogue on how women can lead the sustainability agenda. In a continuation of the official theme of International Women’s Day 2024 - ‘Invest in Women’ - the conference aims to create a space that fosters collaborations and networking of different participants of the sector.

Conclusions and recommendations drawn from the roundtable and the three panel discussions led by women advancing the sustainability agenda will be produced and aim to contribute to practical and actionable steps for attendees and stakeholders across the region.