WOMEN EMPOWERMENT THROUGH ECOTOURISM

Ecotourism is becoming an attractive option for many tourists as it continues to grow. This is illustrated by (Ziffer 1989) as a movement that potentially involves billions of dollars, politics, the survival of threatened cultures and the preservation of rapidly disappearing wild lands. Despite numerous attempts that have been made to define ecotourism its concept has drawn considerable debate since the 1960s, however, ecotourism can simply be defined as a form of tourism involving responsible travel to natural areas, conserving the environment and improving the well-being of the local people.

Photo credit: Mateusz Dach
According to the United Nations (UN), gender equality implies that women and men should enjoy the same opportunities, outcomes, rights, and obligations in all spheres of life. A critical aspect of promoting gender equality is the empowerment of women, with a focus on identifying and addressing power imbalances and giving women more autonomy to manage their own lives (United Nations Fund for Population Activities [UNFPA], 2008). Knowledge, access to knowledge, power and skills are important elements of empowerment, this changes women’s lives, enhances their income and increases their self-esteem.

Gender is considered important by proponents of ecotourism in that:

- a) It promotes good natural resource management which protects the key resource upon which ecotourism is based.
- b) Ensures that ecotourism development is derived from the skills and knowledge of the community members.
- c) Gender equity is recognized as a basic human right.

Tourism provides better opportunities for women’s participation in the workforce, women’s entrepreneurship and women’s leadership than other sectors of the economy. The International Labor Organization found that women make up between 60-70% of the labor force in the hotel sector. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) in some countries tourism has almost twice as many women employers as other sectors. As per a UNWTO report, women are more likely to have a leadership voice in tourism business associations and tourism governance than in other sectors.

Some of the impacts of women empowerment include but are not limited to:

- I. Formal and informal employment opportunities in areas which women have existing skills such as cultural performance and crafts.
- II. Employment in areas outside of gender stereotypes e.g., tour guiding.
- III. Economic independence: women can exercise more in decision-making forums involving ecotourism.
- IV. Where women are “custodians of culture”, they gain respect for the roles they play in continuing/reviving cultural practices.
- V. Opportunities for women to gain confidence from interactions with people from outside the local area.
- VI. An increase in men’s respect for their partners, leading to more egalitarian relationships.

Women have close connections with their immediate environment as such they may have knowledge about useful plants, craft production e.g. beading which can lead to the development of tourism products and services.
Il Motiok Women’s Group with the help of Ecotourism Kenya but also linking with other organizations such as Naibunga Conservancy, Laikipia Wildlife Forum, and Rift Valley Adventures has successfully been able to economically empower women through employment in the Ol Gaboli Community lodge has enabled them to gain skills and capacity building through partnerships and networking. Their established links with Ecotourism Kenya and other organizations have also provided them with exposure and networks thus building on their social capital. The 300 women have been able to pool funds and established an international standard ecotourism facility, Ol Gaboli Community Lodge that they have linked with other tourism organizations to offer more diversified tourist activities such as camel safaris.
However, women miss out on formal employment opportunities in ecotourism, because social norms continue to restrict the type of economic activities in which women may engage. The discrimination of women in formal employment has been reported in Kenya. In her analysis of the social impact of the ecotourism project in the Selenkei Ranch in Amboseli, Kajiado County, Mwangi (2005) found out that women were not employed at the conservancy as their role was to take care of children. Similar observations have been reported in Asia. Wilkinson and Pratiwi (1995) and Lama (1998) have established that women are overlooked when it comes to tour guiding in the Himalayas and Indonesia. Many women felt that they could not exploit this relatively lucrative economic opportunity, because the women who would be involved in such activities would be labelled as “prostitutes”.

Other negative impacts of women’s involvement in ecotourism are such as:

I. The status and remuneration of women’s jobs are often inferior to that of jobs held by men.
II. When women’s work is associated with cooking and cleaning, they receive no or little pay.
III. Communal benefits may be distributed to male heads of households, ignoring the needs of female-headed households and polygamous societies.
IV. Competition for ecotourism income among different groups in a community undermines social cohesion.
V. Vested interests dominate park management boards, ecotourism associations, and other decision-making bodies, making it difficult for women to voice their opinions.

To address significant inequalities, gender needs to be incorporated into the project design and project frameworks need to go beyond dis-aggregating results to address the root causes of disparities. Therefore, it can be concluded that the conception, planning, and management of ecotourism projects should be done very carefully to minimize their negative impacts on women and the community.
Women and other community participants in ecotourism will become educated as well as economic leaders in their community, creating a model of a micro-economy to be replicated in other regions. As a result, local communities can become promoters for the protection of their natural resources and take pride in the unique surroundings that attract tourists.
REFERENCES
