

Enhancing Women's Participation in Mountain Tourism, Prospects and Challenges

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And

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Abstract: Women's participation in mountain tourism in Nepal that started during 1920s to 1930s with portering has reached a stage, though in small numbers, where female trek leaders are leading solo women tourist trekkers, working as team leaders in mountain expeditions and operating hotels, lodges, restaurants, trekking and travel agencies from the top management positions. However, the majority of their involvements are at lower level jobs in various organized sub sectors of tourism. Will the balanced development of tourism sector be possible without enhancing the equitable share of women workers in access to and control over the benefits from mountain tourism in a context where more than fifty percent of total population is occupied by women? This brief paper attempts to answer his question.

There is high need of pro-women (focusing on protecting and safeguarding of women) tourism policy, action plan and programs to pull mountain women from their smaller numbers and lower status of participations in mountain tourism, establish equal to men counterparts in employments and businesses, benefit them of mountain tourism with fair share & just manners, empower socially and thus help in structural transformation in mountain society.

Key words: women, mountain tourism, enhancement, equality, constraints, challenges

The context

Mountain tourism is the pioneer of all the tourism in Nepal that started from 1949, the year Nepal opened for tourists. It often relates to mountain tourism while talking about Nepalese tourism, for the identity Nepal has earned as the mountainous country in the world. Around 80% from a total of 1, 47,181 sq km area in Nepal is covered by mountains where the majority of populations live in these areas.

Out of more than 3,500 km. vast extensions of the highest Himalayas termed as Hindu Kush – Himalaya ranging from Afghanistan in the north-west to Myanmar in the south-east, Nepal Himalaya, covering approx. 800 sq. km., begins from Byasrishi Himal in Darchula in the west and ends in Kanchejunga in the east. In the midst of around 1792 mountain peaks existed in Nepal , 1310 peaks are above 6000 meter and only 326 peaks have been opened for climbing.

Seasonal agriculture, animal husbandry, transhumance system, trans-himalayan trading, seasonal works & trades (by migrating to India) and recently innovated mountain tourism are the key occupations of the people of mountain regions of Nepal for their livelihoods.

Nepal Mountain regions are generally characterized by irregular & steep relief of land/surface, deep gorges, low temperature, fragile ecology, and poorly developed soil, limited choice of crops, remote isolated villages, low oxygen pressure and low humidity of air.

Mountain areas are rich in age-old cultures. Mountains, devotedly considered as abode of gods, are source of fresh water such as rivers, streams and lakes. Mountains are environmentally fragile (low regenerating capacity of flora) but culturally rich and inhabited by the majority of poor but hardworking Tibeto Mongoloid populace. Diversified ethnic people like Byasis, Saukas, Nyimbis, Mugalis, Dolpowas, Lopas, Jharwas, Langtaye, Hyolmowas, Sherpas, Gurung, Rai, Limbu, Magar, Thakali, Raute, Damai, Kami and Lhomis, etc. the inhabitants at the altitude ranging from 3000 feet to 17000 feet (so far with the highest settlement at the bottom of Kalapathar in Solukhumbu). These people in mountain areas of Nepal are struggling with hardships of all these natural features for their subsistence.

Where the geological and climatic features in those mountain regions are challenges for the development, the same with unlimited natural attractions¹ blending with cultural attractions² are pull factors for Nepal for the mountain tourism development and push factors for tourists to travel to these mountain destinations. The blending of this push and pull factors for mountain tourism have resulted in economic, socio-cultural and environmental opportunities for local inhabitants in mountain regions.

Grandon (2007) in his work³ entitled 'Early women in tourism' mentions the involvement of Nepalese women especially Sherpas in mountain tourism in the form of portering and cooking during 1920s and 1930s. It was beginning period of mountain tourism in Nepal and mountaineering was in full swing with competitions among various expedition teams of Europe to ascend Mt. Everest (Sagarmatha) and other mountains like Annapurna, Kanchenjunga and Dhaulagiri. However, there was a trend of mountain tourism laborers to migrate to Darjeeling, India, during 1920s in search of work in the evolving mountaineering industry, which used to be the base for mountaineering recruitment and adventure.

A number of organizations like National Trust for Nature Conservation⁴ (NTC), International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), Tourism for Rural Poverty Alleviation Program (TRPAP), Nepal Tourism Board (NTB), Kathmandu Environment Education Project (KEEP), Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP), Mother's Club Central Committee (MCCC), Women Entrepreneurs Association of Nepal (WEAN), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), International Labor Organization (ILO), Nepal Academy of Tourism and Hospitality Management (NATHAM) and 3 Sisters Adventure Trekking (P) Ltd. etc. are found to be involved in enhancing women's participation in mountain tourism. These organizations through their continuous efforts in past and present periods have been creating awareness about local women's potentials in tourism, empowering them by offering training and capacity building activities and helping to increase their involvements in mountain tourism.

This beginning of Women's involvement in the history of mountain tourism activities that started during 1920s has reached a stage today where women trek leaders are proudly leading Mountain trekking for solo incoming foreign women trekkers in Nepal. However, this number is still very limited from gender perspective compare to men number. Three sister trekking agencies based in Pokhara run by Lucky, Dicky and Nicky Chhetri, three Nepalese sisters, are pioneers in the profession of female trekking guides. Since 1994, they have been working towards empowering women in trekking industry in Nepal. Their aims have been and continue to be, to empower and develop women through tourism and to encourage sustainable tourism in remote areas where there is little hope for the future.

¹ Snowcapped Himalayan ranges, unlimited flora and fauna, scenic beauty, unique landscapes, charming mountain valleys and deep gorges, etc.

² varied indigenous identities, history & heritage, dissimilar traditions, contradictory community structures, composite culture, differing but unique family relationships & lifestyles with unmatched warmth and hospitality of people of this region, a number of festivals

³ The Kathmandu Post, Feb 1, 2008.

⁴ formally known as King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation (KMTNC)

Mountain Tourism is the first activity from where a handful of Nepalese women began their association with institutionalized tourism activities in Nepal.

Though research in tourism from gender perspective is at infant stage, the minimal findings and outlooks show that the patriarchy society under age old feudal social-cultural and economic system undermining the roles and responsibilities of women as subordinate to men, dual role/work burden (maintaining both families/children as well as household chores), weak position of women in power sharing & decision making, lack of strong government policies sensitive of gender issues protecting indigenous women under minorities and weak implementation modalities can be seen as major causal factors for low participation of women in mountain tourism in Nepal.

The process of tourism development in Nepal through the strategy of economically planned development periods started from 1956. Out of a total of ten planned development periods implemented in past, the eighth five year development plan (1992 -97) recognized the importance of skill development of women and particular attention was given to education and vocational training for women. Dictated by the condition of a very low female participation in tourism sector (10.2 percent of direct female employment in tourism sector⁵), a need to encourage and increase their participation in tourism sector in line with the national development policies has been felt strongly.

The opportunities available for women on mountain tourism is very limited and mostly concentrated in urban mountain areas like Kathmandu and Pokhara as well as on popular trekking routes in Annapurna and Everest regions. Women workers in mountain tourism are comparatively in higher numbers with low skilled and illiterate jobs in informal sector like tea shops, small lodges (Gurung 1995). Apart of some number of women engaged in managing local hotels/lodges as honors along the trekking trails, majority of their numbers are associated in lower level jobs compared to men who are engaged in executive and higher executive level jobs in the organized sector. The larger portion of the women jobs involve as porters on seasonal basis in trekking companies, house keepers in hotels, air tickets reservation and ticket issuance (sales outlets) staff in airlines and cooks in restaurants/hotels and other menial jobs. The findings show that there are comparatively larger numbers of women workforce in informal sector like tea shops, lodges, guest houses.

Women workforce involvement specially on the popular trekking trails in mountain regions are involved not in any specific but diversified jobs ranging from portering, cooking, serving(waitresses) food for tourists, cleanings rooms (housekeeping), dishwashing, vegetable farming, performing cultural program to making transactions of sales at lodges.

However, there are also some indirect employments and income from the production and supplies of vegetables, dairy products, fruits in agriculture industries, transport services, communication services, traditional crafts, textiles and weaving which are consumed by mountain tourism. The performance of cultural programs with signing and dancing in both rural and urban areas of mountain regions is the most common. There is no study done about women's involvement in sex trade in urban areas.

Perception of women's participation in Mountain Tourism

United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) celebrated the World Tourism Day on 27 September 2007 with the theme '*Tourism opens doors for women*' highlighting the role of tourism to serve as 'an open door' for women and a catalyst to gender empowerment through the world. According to International Labor Organization (ILO) about 46 percent of the work force in the tourism industry is made up of women.

⁵ Source: UNDP/ILO, CEDA Tourism Workforce Survey 1990

However, this massive and functional female presence is accompanied by the frequent vertical segregation of women that denies managerial responsibilities to them. Looking at the lower role and position of women in society, there is potentially an economic importance for tourism to open door for women and to provide additional income to help to support families. Under the framework of UNWTO's own 'Global Code of Ethics for Tourism', UNWTO intends to join forces with United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) to enhance further the role of women in tourism.

A decade long armed conflict (1996 – 2006) in Nepal prior of comprehensive peace agreement between the Government of Nepal and The Communist Party of Nepal (CPN – Maoist) in November 2006 had definitely sidelined and less prioritized the matter of gender in tourism sector at a stage when the ailing industry was struggling hard to revive.

Conflicts have usually a bad impact on gender equality in tourism as shown by Karthikeyan and Crouch (2007). They outline that progress in recent times has been significantly negated in Sri Lanka and East Timor by the internal conflicts.

Constraints in enhancing the larger participation of women in mountain tourism in Nepal:

- Lack of self – esteem, leadership, entrepreneurial skills and capacity.
- Financial independency or lack of access to credit and resources.
- Dual roles and responsibilities of women in the forms of mother as well as homemakers and/or internal service providers.
- Insufficiency in the delivery of the required level of training, skills and capacity buildings in women's priority occupation.
- Less assistance with regular follow up, guidance to persuade and enable them to enter the competitive tourism industry.

Challenges ahead:

- Taking the benefits of tourism to the grassroots people in equitable manner.
- Promoting equitable sharing of tourism benefits with genders in communities.
- Interventions from influential village leaders in favor of high resourceful women in mountainous villages as a barrier to low resourceful women.

Recommendations (What is needed?):

It is required to help foster the growth of independent, self sufficient, decision making and acting women in tourism sector especially in far flung mountain rural areas in Nepal by encouraging self empowerment.

The diversification of women workforce involvement out of the periphery of traditional and well know tourism triangle (Δ) in between Kathmandu, Pokhara (Annapurna) and Namche (Sagarmatha) regions to many inaccessible but exotic destinations in midwestern, far western and eastern development regions is the need of time.

There should be the controlling of environmental degradation in the pristine mountains as well as to benefit maximum numbers of grass root and marginalized people in the Himalayas in the balanced way from gender point of view. This will help to address country's poverty alleviating initiative positively by tourism. Some other suggestions relevant for enhancing women's participation in mountain tourism can be as follows.

- Enabling policies for promoting and protecting women's employment with high privilege and provisions in Mountain Tourism.
- Increase public awareness of the interrelation between tourism and its beneficial role for women.
- Providing women tourism entrepreneurs with the necessary training tools to enhance to integrate pro-people sustainable tourism (PPST) practices in their entrepreneurs.
- The majority of the target should be to provide benefits to those women who belong to low-income, unskilled or semi-skilled groups from minorities.
- The need of time is to form a join forum consisting private sectors, the government bodies, internationals bodies, NGO's, INGO's, tourism associations and research organizations for collaborative and innovative development of mountain tourism ensuring increased participation of local women.
- The promotion of gender equality, empowerment of women and the elimination of gender disparity in education is the third UN Millennium Development Goal to which Nepal should be committed.
- On the contrary of insufficient information base to ascertain the magnitude of both positive and negative implications of mountain tourism on the mountain women, more research and study should be initiated and promoted.
- In order to attract increased number of mountaineers which are also associated with assisting the livelihoods of women tourism entrepreneurs and workers in mountain areas, there should be revision on royalty structures of Nepalese peaks. These peaks are comparatively expensive than neighboring China and Pakistan.

Conclusion

The gender equality in tourism industry concerning the participation of women at both decision making & implementations and utilization of benefits in a context where fifty percent of the entire population is constituted by women in Nepal is of great concern.

Nepal today is at the pathway of entire political, social, economic transformation (progress) with the successful completion of constituent assembly (CA) poll. Economic development of Nepal very much depends of harnessing potentials of water, tourism, non-timber forests and high-value low-volume agricultural products and human resources. Women are crucially important in all these sectors.

The long waited Nepalese people's desire of nation building as a new Nepal would be difficult to accomplish unless the women porportion of the entire population is not strengthened and trasnformed both economically and socially. Toursim sector, as dominated by mountain tourism, is a major sector of Nepalese economy with competative and comparative advantages. There must be considerations to fulfill this gender gap in mountain toursm both quantitatively and qualitatively.

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