



# **Organising unorganised mountain women: a case study of gender tourism in the Garhwal Himalayas, Uttarakhand**

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## **Summary**

This study documents the situation of women as members of a workforce with a special focus on the tourism industry in Uttarakhand. Although Garhwali women constitute almost 50% of the region's population and have a relatively high rate of literacy, the tourism industry displays significant horizontal and vertical gender segregation in the labour market.

This paper identifies the specialised services that can be developed for women, given the natural resources, tourism potential, and marketing of products for tourists.

Because of indigenous beliefs and the dominant role of women in livelihood systems, mountain women have traditionally been afforded greater freedom of movement, independence in decision-making, and higher status in society than have women in the plains. But some common factors continue to pose major hurdles in the process of regional development, especially for women. Among them are following.

- *Patriarchy*: Societies throughout the region are male-dominated, more pronounced among Muslims and Hindus but also true among Buddhists and Christians.
- *Low self-image and self-esteem*: Women are considered inferior and even a kind of negative force, often accused of witchcraft and causing harm to others.
- *Patrilocal residence*: The patriarchal system, shaped by patrilocal residence and kinship relationships, force women out of their natal homes after marriage to live in unfamiliar surroundings under the control of their husbands' families.

- *Inequitable inheritance rights:* Women have been at the forefront of the agricultural labour force but do not hold ownership and tenure rights to land, trees, water, other natural resources, or livestock. This hampers women's ability to expand their livelihood options and, lacking the collateral requirements for loans, denies them credit from financial institutions.
- *Decreased access to forest and water resources:* The reduction of forest and water resources caused by environmental degradation has an impact on the women responsible for the collection and management of these resources, often forcing them to travel longer distances to meet the daily needs of their households. Environmental degradation increases the erosion of topsoil, leading to crop failure, which in turn leads to migration, food deficits, and a higher incidence of trafficking of mountain women into lowland and urban centres.
- *Heavy workloads:* Women undertake the daily backbreaking chores of carrying water, fodder, and firewood up and down steep mountain slopes, and this consumes all their time and energy. Girl children are kept back from school and given the responsibility of caring for their younger siblings and helping with domestic work.
- *Absent men:* Conspicuous male migration for short or long periods is increasing throughout the region as people struggle to find ways to sustain their families and farmlands. This leaves more of the labour burden on the shoulders of women. However, this may not give them a greater role in decision-making, as the presence of older men in the household usually negates such an opportunity.

Since highlanders have limited income-generating means and are dependent largely on growing a few cash crops, tourism has become an important alternative source of income and significant for the region's development. Among the economic benefits of tourism, the handicrafts' industry has proved to be the most remunerative. Most hill villages, however, are located in remote areas that are infrequently visited by tourists, and most transactions do not involve direct contact between producers and buyers, thus reducing the profit margins of producers. Hospitality is another source of income-generation. But this is also limited to a few tourist destinations and usually not remote villages. Jobs such as portage of food and baggage provide a minimal income but are not significant in alleviating poverty.

Owing to its size, rapid growth, and diverse and dynamic nature, the tourism industry is characterised by flexibility and as an important agent for the advancement of women. This enables it to develop key initiatives and models to benefit women that other industries can benefit from.

This paper highlights and documents the situation of women as members of the workforce with a special focus on the tourism industry of the Garhwal Himalayas in Uttaranchal. Its objectives are to:



- assess the current status of the female population on the basis of secondary sources of information;
- study the characteristics of tourists visiting the state in terms of socioeconomic and demographic parameters and gender-wise distribution;
- assess the magnitude of current gender participation rates at destination nodes; and
- highlight the role of gender participation in addressing the issues of poverty alleviation and suggesting measures to cater to the future tourist demand.

This study looks at Garhwal region in the state of Uttaranchal, which came into existence as the 26th state of the Indian Union in 2000. Its primary data were collected with the help of structured questionnaires through a short survey at various destinations across the Garhwal. Destinations were selected on the basis of the magnitude of tourist flow at specific popular destinations with a stratified sample of 500 tourists. In addition to the survey of tourists, the data regarding gender participation were collected through another random survey conducted in the same destinations among the employees of the hotel sector.

Consisting of 13 hilly districts of the former Uttar Pradesh, the region is rich in flora and fauna and attracts a large number of tourists. Some of the most important pilgrimage centres of the country are in Uttaranchal, made up of two main cultural and political divisions of the Garhwal and the Kumaon, covering 53,485 square kilometres with a population of almost eight and a half million people. Rain and alpine forests cover major parts of the region and are home to some highly endangered wildlife species and include the national parks of the Valley of Flowers in Chamoli, the Nanda Devi National Park, the Govind National Park, and the Gangotri National Park, among others.

The state of the tourism industry in Garhwal is quite similar to that existing in labour markets of the country in general. The tourism sector has significant horizontal and vertical gender segregation. Horizontally, women and men are placed in different occupations. Women are employed as waitresses, chambermaids, sweepers, receptionists, and sales' ladies, while men are employed as managers, gardeners, construction workers, and drivers. The typical gender pyramid is prevalent vertically as well. Women dominate all lower levels of occupation characterised by fewer career development opportunities, while men tend to dominate key managerial positions. This is in spite of the fact that the contributions of the women in many social movements, such as the Chipko and the anti-mining and anti-alcohol movements, have been noteworthy.

Despite an extremely promising scenario, severe constraints have slowed down the process of women's active participation in Garhwal's tourism sector,

such as lack of awareness, education, and training. There is a special need for training in financial management, knowledge of foreign languages, and computer skills. Community-based tourism activities allow women access to the paid workforce, but expansions of this nature involving Garhwali women groups seem to face serious problems due to lack of marketing skills. There is a low level of employment of women in the workforce structure, even in places such as Dehradun and Haridwar where the concentration of economic activities is the highest. This could be due to a number of reasons, including the lack of skill training.

In the hotel sector, which is usually the largest employer, women find employment around their area of origin; in fact, none of the female employees are from outside the Garhwal region, though this is not true for male employment. Among the locally-recruited employees, 33% are male employees compared to 78% female. This indicates that women do not venture outside the region in search of better employment opportunities, due to family constraints and thus remain in the peripheral areas of the job market.

Men are clearly dominant in terms of gender and the hierarchy of jobs. Only 3% of female employees occupy the highest paid posts, compared to 30% of male employees. As one moves towards the lower paid positions, a concentration of women workers becomes prominent. In Gangotri and Yamunotri, all the female employees belong to the poorest wage-group, earning <5,000 rupees per annum, and 93% of the female employees belong to the two lowest wage-earning groups with incomes of <5,000 rupees or <10,000 rupees per annum. In comparison to this, more than 41% of the male employees earn above 10,000 rupees per annum. The highest wage group, earning >15,000 per annum, has no female employees.

To provide self-employment opportunities for local residents, the government of Uttarakhand has offered state assistance of up to 20% for projects with a capital investment of up to rupees ten lakhs (Rs 10,00,000). Projects under this include fast-food centres, retail outlets for local handicrafts, plying buses and taxis, provision of equipment for adventure sports, establishing small residential accommodation, setting up of tourism centres with restaurants, tented residential facilities, and garages. But the state government has not specifically targeted gender equality or enhancement in its planning policies for the tourism sector.

This is unfortunate as nearly one-third of Uttarakhand's visitors are women belonging to the age group of from 20 to 60 years. While developing facilities for tourists, consideration needs to be given to the region's high female population (almost 50%), and the large number of female tourists who come here.



## Conclusion

Only the participation of women in the decision-making process will help achieve equality of control over the factors of production and the distribution of benefits through consensus and mobilisation. It is imperative for women to be able to exercise equal rights over family property and assets as that would automatically increase their confidence, self-esteem, and decision-making powers, ensure their position in society, and add to their future security. In the specific context of starting and running an enterprise, it can provide collateral that will enable them to access credit and capital. The author recommends the following to strengthen the role of women's participation in Garhwal's tourism industry.

- Development of the handicraft industry to form an important part of a comprehensive strategic planning programme for community – especially women's participation – in tourism
- Measures by local government, private sector, and NGOs to promote capacity building by working with women's groups separately in the beginning to enable them to articulate and follow up their interests. This would provide financial independence for local women and encourage them to seek education.
- Programmes to promote enterprises in mountain areas, particularly those meant for women entrepreneurs, should be integrated, providing all-inclusive support from a single window, including providing credit, service, and marketing.
- While production can be undertaken economically at small, micro-, and household levels, marketing must be done on a larger collective scale to make the enterprises viable. Direct participation by women entrepreneurs exposes them to wider markets as well as a better return for their efforts.
- The setting up of programmes and schemes by employers that encourage women to move into non-traditional occupations, invest in women's training, appoint them to managerial positions, and re-appoint them after years of less involvement due to family responsibilities
- The lowering of standards for locals' entry and compensation through on-the-job training to overcome the disadvantage of low levels of education and chances of entry into the workforce
- Developing and strengthening social, institutional, and legal mechanisms to improve women's access to and control over the resources necessary to start and run enterprises
- Engaging the tourism industry to educate tourists about women's rights and respect in an intercultural context
- Setting up all-women managed residential complexes for women tourists in the major destinations of the state

