

# Unveiling the distinctive characteristics of women entrepreneur networks in the tourism industry of developing countries: Insights from the literature

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## Abstract

The tourism industry in developing countries can be a powerful force for economic growth and gender empowerment, especially for women entrepreneurs. However, women entrepreneurs in this sector face crucial challenges, particularly regarding network development and maintenance. This study dissects existing literature on women entrepreneurs and their networks in the tourism industry of developing countries. The ensuing discussion reveals how gender impacts the composition of an entrepreneur's network including social and cultural norms. Moreover, the distinctive characteristics of women tourism entrepreneur networks in developing countries are underscored, differentiating these networks from those of their male counterparts. Future research should focus on diversifying stakeholder networks and systematically providing access to role models to support the growth and empowerment of tourism women entrepreneurs in developing countries.

## Keywords

Women entrepreneurs  
Networks  
Tourism  
Developing countries

## Introduction

The tourism industry is a powerful driver of economic growth in developing countries, creating employment, foreign exchange earnings, and has the opportunity to reduce poverty and inequality. Specifically, tourism can significantly strengthen and empower women in the economy and society more broadly, and women entrepreneurship is growing in developing countries. For instance, between 8 and 10 million formal small and medium enterprises (SMEs) have at least one female owner (The World Bank, 2023). While becoming entrepreneurs in developing countries brings various benefits to women, such as enhancing economic independence, improving social inclusion, and empowerment (World Tourism Organization, 2019), women entrepreneurs continue to face challenges ranging from limited access to capital and resources, to cultural and societal norms that can hinder their entrepreneurial pursuits (Panda, 2018).

One of the greatest challenges to women entrepreneurs in developing countries is their capacity to access, build and maintain networks (Panda, 2018). Networks are defined as a type of collaboration that does not take the form of a merger or joint venture (Go & Williams, 1994). In terms of entrepreneurship, it can be defined as: entrepreneurs' relationships or connections with external parties such as individuals or organisations (Premaratna, 2002) and they are essential elements for expanding and sustaining a business (Makandwa et al., 2023). While many scholars have emphasised the importance of networks for entrepreneurs in terms of improving firm performance (Jiang et al., 2018; Ribeiro et al., 2021), gaining access to information and resources, knowledge sharing, business growth, and innovation, little is known about women entrepreneurs' networks in the tourism industry

(Figueroa-Domecq et al., 2015). In particular, insights into the features of women entrepreneurs' networks in developing countries remain largely unexplored.

This paper explores and reviews existing academic literature on women entrepreneurs and their networks in the tourism industry of developing countries. Furthermore, the paper aims to explore, through the literature, whether women entrepreneurs are less successful than their male counterparts due to a lack of networks (Wang et al., 2020). The paper then discusses future research opportunities.

## Gender and the composition of entrepreneur networks

Previous studies have explored entrepreneur networks (Hoang & Antoncic, 2003; Slotte-Kock & Coviello, 2010), highlighting that businesses are embedded in the social networks within which they are linked (Granovetter, 1985). To obtain the necessary resources to operate and grow their businesses, entrepreneurs will often focus on establishing and growing their network relationships (Valeri & Baggio, 2022). As Robinson and Stubberud (2009) noted, networks are valuable to small firms because entrepreneurs use them to enhance marketing initiatives and innovations that they might not otherwise be able to do independently. This can be applied to other aspects of business operations where entrepreneurs see value in collaborating within or outside of their networks to achieve objectives that would be beyond their individual capacities, often in terms of securing capital and resources (Bogren et al., 2013).

The study of entrepreneurship in tourism has been a field of academic inquiry since the early 1970s (Cohen, 1989; Kibedi, 1979; Williams et al., 1989). For tourism, given the large number of stakeholders often involved and the complexity of

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these relationships, understanding entrepreneurship networks is crucial. For instance, Zhao et al. (2011) point to the importance of personal networks and social capital for the tourism business to enhance opportunities for success. Moreover, Kimbu and Ngoasong (2016) and Kimbu et al. (2019) highlighted the essential role of collaborative networks, specifically for women entrepreneurs, in providing access to vital financial and non-financial resources such as training opportunities and business creation/management information.

In recent years, researchers have recognised the importance of considering gender in the field of entrepreneurship and networks because more value can be found in the detail of the relational dimension that describes the networks' content (Valeri & Katsoni, 2021), while acknowledging that the networks of men and women entrepreneurs differ significantly (Bogren et al., 2013; Watson, 2012).

One critical factor is the composition of an entrepreneur's network. For example, research has shown that networking with people of the same gender is preferred by both men and women (García & Carter, 2009; Valeri & Katsoni, 2021). Women's networks are impacted by gender-based standards surrounding acceptable behavior, which restricts them to kinship ties, whereas men's networks continue to be considerably wider (Handaragama & Kusakabe, 2021). For example, women's entrepreneurial networks are created by the close association of family, friends, and work (Surangi, 2022; Watson, 2012). The limited span of these networks has been found to impact on access to resources, education, credit, and information, all of which have impacted women's self-confidence (Handaragama & Kusakabe, 2021).

Another impact on women's networks is gendered social and cultural norms. Women entrepreneurs are found to be held to different expectations than their male counterparts, maintaining "triple roles" (Moser, 1989, p.1801), which consist of their reproductive roles, household duties, and productive and societal roles. While males have been found to prioritise networking (Ahl & Marlow, 2012), in patriarchal societies, religion and traditions have significant impacts on networking opportunities for women entrepreneurs (Makandwa et al., 2023). For example, women entrepreneurs were found to struggle to sell their products in the market without support from male relatives in Bangladesh due to social norms (Rajoana & Saxena, 2022). The burden on women to get permission from the 'man of the house' or the husband is necessary under the patriarchal hegemony in India (Johnson & Mehta, 2022). These isolated cases illustrate a plethora of gender-related hurdles to networking. This is significant because researchers have discovered that the main contributing factor as to why women entrepreneurs are less successful than their male counterparts is a lack of networks (Wang et al., 2020).

### **The characteristics of women tourism entrepreneur networks in developing countries**

"Collaborative networks are regional and country-specific forums, programs and/or initiatives for networking, skills development and access to resources and agency for women tourism entrepreneurs." (Kimbu et al., 2019, p. 161). Dictated by the circumstances of developing countries alluded to above, women entrepreneur networks differ from those of males across two distinct dimensions: opportunities and barriers.

In terms of opportunities for women entrepreneurs in developing countries, the tourism sector attracts more women than other industries due to its flexibility (Rao et al., 2022) and has extended numerous opportunities to women to participate

in the formal economy (del Mar Alonso-Almeida, 2012). For instance, cooking skills, which were generationally and traditionally passed down by mothers and aunties, become accessible skills when establishing restaurant businesses (Katongole et al., 2013). Therefore, not only can existing skills be transformed into entrepreneurial skills, but also a byproduct of this process is the transformation of traditional gender roles in developing countries through the conduit of tourism (Kimbu & Ngoasong, 2016; Lynch, 1998).

On the other hand, gender discrimination is one of the chief barriers for women entrepreneurs in developing countries. Often, women tourism entrepreneurs are forced to use masculine stereotypes to build networks and are prevented from forming business relationships, or they are often simply excluded due to gender (Ribeiro et al., 2021). For instance, women entrepreneurs disproportionately participate in the informal tourism sector because they encounter gender discrimination in established systems (Kimbu & Ngoasong, 2016). In addition, in some cultures, women are restricted from interacting with males outside their family structure due to community perceptions, and so the ability to develop networks with external community members, tourists and/or clients is lacking (Makandwa et al., 2023). Consequently, women entrepreneurs in a majority of developing countries restrict their ties-seeking activities to networks of other women entrepreneurs (Goyal & Yadav, 2014).

The lack of entrepreneurial role models is a further obstacle for women entrepreneurs. Role models may be a source of 'vicarious learning' when the learning process is carried out through direct observations and from others' stories or their success journeys (Moudry & Thaichon, 2020). A person who exhibits admirable behaviours, distinctive personal traits, and other characteristics are referred to as an entrepreneurial role model (Bosma et al., 2012), and it is crucial for young women to observe and emulate these attributes (Agarwal et al., 2022). Lindvert et al. (2022) emphasises this point by explaining that the value of having more women participate in entrepreneurship and act as role models for other women is expanding. In addition, women tourism entrepreneurship role models in developing countries is vital for empowering women entrepreneurs and providing training, education, and motivation from such role models (Rajoana & Saxena, 2022). Connecting with entrepreneurial role models can be especially helpful for women entrepreneurs to build networks and enhance business creation within the target group (The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) & The European Commission, 2023).

### **Conclusion**

This paper investigates and evaluates the body of scholarly research on women entrepreneurs and their networks in the tourism sector of developing nations. The literature demonstrates that building entrepreneur networks is different for males and females. While entrepreneurs prefer connecting with the same gender, women entrepreneurs have limited opportunities to interact with male entrepreneurs due to social and cultural norms. While the tourism sector can provide opportunities for women in developing countries to transform traditional skills such as cooking into entrepreneurial skills, gender discrimination and a lack of role models for women entrepreneurs in the tourism industry of developing countries are barriers. Unveiling the distinct characteristics of women entrepreneur networks in the tourism sector of developing countries can inform our understanding of why women entrepreneurs experience a lower rate of success than their male

counterparts. The future of research in this area should explore: 1) how to build and expand the diversity of stakeholders in women's entrepreneur networks, particularly how can women entrepreneurs in developing countries go beyond social and cultural norms to expand opportunities for business development; 2) establishing an approach to business networking that is not limited by the characteristics of a traditional entrepreneurial network structure such as those limited to the same gender and close acquaintances; and, 3) how to facilitate the construction of entrepreneurs' networks in a manner that transcends gender and provides access to role models to support the growth and empowerment of tourism women entrepreneurs in developing countries.

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