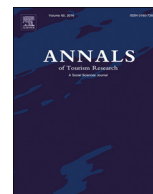


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Research Note

Women's empowerment through self-employment in tourism

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Women's empowerment is a central issue in the development process of countries all over the world (Agarwal, 1997). According to Rao (2011), it is a process in which women individually and collectively become active, knowledgeable, and goal oriented, and lead or support initiatives to overcome gender inequalities. One popular approach to women's empowerment has been the establishment of associations, sometimes called self-help groups, or SHGs. Members of these groups choose to pool their resources in order to radically change their lives and the lives of their families, and in order to have an impact on their communities; in this way, SHGs seek to empower women both economically and socially. This research note explores SHGs as a strategy for women's empowerment in the tourism industry in the rural, developing-region context of Serbia, and presents the results of a survey.

Overview of the SHG concept

SHGs work by enabling women to gain greater control over resources, including material possessions; intellectual resources like knowledge, information, ideas; and decision-making power in the home, community, society, and nation (Hashemi, Schuler, & Riley, 1996; Orser, Riding, & Manley, 2006). Membership in a group gives women visibility and provides them with a legitimate forum to articulate their needs. It permits a gradual building of their capacity through sharing that enhances participatory development (Nussbaum, 2011). SHGs generally focus on supporting skill development, nurturing invention, facilitating access to credit from financial institutions for micro-enterprises or projects, inculcating the value of frugality, and supervising credit for those participants who are economically destitute.

Empowerment in general is a complex concept, with overlapping dimensions (Nussbaum, 2011), and this is no less true in the context of women and SHGs. While SHGs seek to promote women's entrepreneurial growth and self-employment, in traditionally male-dominated societies, it is important to go beyond mere metrics of increases in these areas, and probe more deeply as to whether the women entrepreneurs believe and act upon a sense of increased agency (Calás, Smircich, & Bourne, 2009).

Women's empowerment in the Serbian context

Women's entrepreneurship first garnered notable mention in Serbia in the first half of the 1990s, in relation to support programs of international organizations aimed at speeding up the economic and social inclusion of women and children refugees from unstable ex-Yugoslav territories (Markovic, Manderson, & Kelaher, 2002). Education for women in a Serbian society in transition was organized in order to raise women's awareness about start-up opportunities, particularly sole trader roles and manufacturing workshops, so they could become self-employed and provide for themselves their families.

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