

Empowerment of women in the tourism industry: Experiences from Samaipata, Bolivia

Empoderamiento de mujeres en la industria del turismo: Experiencias en Samaipata, Bolivia

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Resumen

El siguiente trabajo de investigación ofrece una visión del fenómeno del (des)empoderamiento femenino en la industria del turismo en Bolivia, tomando un estudio de caso en la ciudad de Samaipata y combinándolo con datos a nivel nacional. El documento explorará, a través de un enfoque de métodos mixtos, cómo las normas locales de género, así como los factores sociales y económicos, afectan a la experiencia femenina en el sector turístico. Para ello, ese trabajo se basa en el concepto de empoderamiento de Scheyvens (1999); el enfoque cuantitativo utiliza datos de encuestas secundarias, recopilados por el Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE), así como datos de la Red de Soluciones para el Desarrollo Sostenible (SDSN), para ejecutar regresiones transversales, con el fin de comprender qué impacto tiene el sector turístico con relación a la segregación ocupacional y el empoderamiento económico. Los hallazgos cualitativos corroboran este descubrimiento, destacando que las mujeres que trabajan en turismo experimentan altos niveles de empoderamiento, así como una mayor autoestima y el fortalecimiento de la autoestima, la autoeficacia y el capital social entre las mujeres directivas y empleadas, fomentando así un sentido de empoderamiento dentro de este grupo demográfico.

Abstract

The following research paper provides an insight into the phenomenon of female (dis)empowerment in the tourism industry in Bolivia, by conducting a case study in the town of Samaipata and combining it with data at a national level. The paper will explore, through a mixed-methods approach, how local gender norms, as well as social and economic factors, affect the female experience in the tourism sector. To do so, an expansion upon the empowerment framework (Scheyvens, 1999) was realized. The quantitative approach utilizes secondary survey data gathered by the National Institute of Statistics (INE), as well as data from the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), to run cross-sectional regressions, to understand what impact the tourism sector has on the relationship between occupational segregation and economic empowerment. The qualitative analysis is based on primary data collected through interviews conducted in Samaipata. The quantitative findings suggest that a large tourism sector is associated with an overall decrease in the tourism gender pay gap, indicating that the tourism industry may increase female economic empowerment. The qualitative findings corroborate this discovery, highlighting that working in the tourism industry empowers women, for instance, increasing their self-esteem and self-efficacy. Based on the findings, gender norms such as machismo also play an important role in shaping female experiences.

Introduction

Globally, women make up most of the tourism workforce, and the industry is often framed as an instrument for not only the advancement of women but also the development of local economies (Gutierrez & Vafadari, 2023). Recently, the United Nations World Tourism Barometer (UNWTO) Secretary General, Zurab Pololikashvili, praised the industry, calling it a “True champion of gender equality” (UNWTO, 2022).

An argument often used when tourism is highlighted as a driver of gender equality and female empowerment is that it acts as a major source of job creation. It provides job opportunities with relatively low barriers of entry for women, allowing them to shift from more traditional economic sectors such as agriculture (Voumik et al., 2023). A developing tourism sector can offer employment prospects and attract many female workers (UNWTO, 2022).

However, many challenges persist, and women continue to be overrepresented in the lower-paid positions and face the most precarious working conditions with limited options to advance (Jackman, 2022; Ferguson & Alarcón, 2015).

In Bolivia, tourism has become a significant industry and is also driven by a female-dominated workforce, with 76% of all workers being female (Medinaceli, 2022). Despite its growing size and impact on the economy, existing literature on the Bolivian tourism industry is scant; exceptions include, e.g., Peredo & Wurzelmann (2015) and Lima Cortez (2010). This has led us to formulate the following problem statement and research questions.

Problem statement: How does the Bolivian tourism industry impact the (dis)empowerment of female workers and business owners?

- How does gendered occupational segregation influence the economic empowerment of women in the tourism sector in Bolivia?
- How do gender norms and networks shape the experiences of women working in Samaipata's tourism industry?
- How does working in the tourism industry influence the self-esteem and self-efficacy of the women in it?

In recent decades, academic scholarship on the intersection between gender and tourism has been growing steadily. These studies have outlined the barriers and challenges that women face in the industry, and how these are inherently tied to gender relations (Baum, 2013; Ferguson, 2011; Ferguson & Alarcón, 2015; Gentry, 2007; Swain, 1995).

Most of the women employed in the industry are found in occupations that are closely linked to either reproductive labor, such as cleaning or cooking, or customer service jobs that play to what is often described as women's "intrinsic" accommodating skills (Baum, 2013; Campos-Soria et al., 2011; Costa et al., 2017; Segovia-Pérez et al., 2021). As Gentry (2007) highlights, the tourism sector and the job opportunities it often provides to women have been criticized for perpetuating very traditional gender norms and commodifying women's domestic abilities. Furthermore, men continue to be disproportionately concentrated in senior and managerial roles, despite the larger share of female workers in the industry (Hutchings et al., 2020). In line with this, findings from Portugal reveal how employer perceptions of worker endowments and attributes that employees should possess are inherently gendered and prevail, even if females do advance to managing positions (Carvalho et al., 2019).

Beyond just job opportunities, Movono & Dahles (2017) argue that tourism has, in part, enabled Fijian women, for example become not only business owners, but also drivers of socio-political change in their communities, in many ways challenging and directly influencing local gender norms.

In a Latin American context, academic attention has been centered on facets of gender roles, labor dynamics, and societal norms within the tourism sector across different regions in Latin America (Duffy et al., 2015; Vandegrift, 2008; Vizcaino-Suárez & Díaz-Carrón, 2019). However, there has been little change in household decision-making, where men continue to be the primary decision-makers.

While there is a growing stream of literature emerging in this field, specifically on the interplay between gender dynamics and the tourism industry, Vizcaino-Suárez & Díaz-Cazrón

(2019) reveal a gap in the current research, with minimal focus on gender discrimination and segregation in this region.

The concept of empowerment has been interpreted and understood in different ways over time. Psychologist Anu Dandona (2015) conceptualizes empowerment as the capacity to exercise autonomous decision-making and affirm control over one's resources (mental, physical, and financial). She emphasizes that empowerment encompasses individuals, organizations, and communities, requiring the cultivation of self-confidence. When it comes to development and women's empowerment, the largest focus has been on their economic empowerment (Chant & Sweetman, 2012; Duflo, 2012). When large development organizations refer to empowerment, they also often frame it within an economic context (see e.g., UNDP, 2024). Friedmann (1992) questions this paradigm, arguing that when looking at empowerment and development, one needs to center the well-being of local populations and their environment, not products and profits. He therefore developed a framework, including psychological, social, and political dimensions of empowerment. Scheyvens (1999) builds upon and extends this framework into the tourism sphere, combining classical notions of economic empowerment with Friedmann's (1992) three dimensions of empowerment.

This paper will take inspiration from and build upon Scheyvens' (1999) framework. While Scheyvens' framework offers a comprehensive view, its broadness poses practical challenges. Therefore, this work aims to elaborate and concretize the economic, psychological, and social dimensions of the framework as follows.

The economic dimension considers empowerment through which opportunities arise and/or additional income is generated due to the tourism sector (Scheyvens, 1999). However, it also takes into consideration that the benefits of economic empowerment are experienced differently among individuals. There is a broad consensus that the development in the tourism sector improves income opportunities for women. Nevertheless, employment opportunities for many female tourist workers are often in low-skilled and low-paid jobs within the industry. While the tourism sector has provided opportunities for women, it does not consistently ensure economic stability and safety. This reality is in part underscored by the issue of the gender pay gap, in which women get paid disproportionately less than men for similar jobs across the globe (Tharenou, 2013).

Gendered segregation has also been theorized as a key factor in decreasing women's salaries in occupations dominated by women (Bergmann, 1974; Zellner, 1972). The pay gap is a widely used measure of gender equality and economic empowerment (OECD, 2012; Reshi & Sudha, 2023), and thus it was chosen to utilize in the analysis to conceptualize female economic (dis)empowerment in relation to occupational segregation in the tourism industry.

Psychological empowerment is connected to high self-esteem, faith in abilities, and optimism about the future (Scheyvens, 1999). Self-esteem broadly refers to an individual's positive judgment of the self. It can be seen as being composed of two distinct dimensions, competencies and worth. Competence refers to the degree to which a person sees themselves as capable and productive. Worth is the degree to which people feel like they are a person of value (Andriani et al., 2022). A woman gains self-esteem by recognizing her ability to control her environment and be competent and successful (Crocker & Major, 1989). Furthermore, a concept connected to self-esteem is self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is the ability to make strategic decisions and feel like you can move and act freely (Andriani et al., 2022). Hence, a psychologically empowered woman in this paper is a woman with high self-efficacy and self-esteem who feels like a capable person of value.

The social dimension of the framework will focus on the concept of social capital. As characterized by Grootaert (1998), social capital is a set of networks, resources, and norms that aid people in ascertaining power and resources. Harpham et al. (2002) further classify social capital into two distinct categories: structural and cognitive. Structural social capital includes networks and roles present within that community, while cognitive social capital accounts for norms, values, and beliefs within that community (Harpaham et al., 2002). Social capital is described as the “missing link” in development, and as such, Saegert et al. (2001) elaborate on the importance of strong social bonds in a community in laying the ground for development.

The *machismo* norms place men in a position of dominance, being considered the heads of households, breadwinners, and decision-makers. Women, on the other hand, are firmly placed in the private sphere where their primary responsibilities are domestic and caregiving tasks (Duffy et al., 2015). Thus, the social dimension of social capital explores how women interact with one another and their relation to gender norms, specifically *machismo*.

The area of research is Samaipata, a town in the region of Santa Cruz, Bolivia, located on the Eastern foothills of the Andes Mountains. Known for its rich cultural heritage, natural landscapes, and mild climate, Samaipata attracts a variety of visitors, local and international alike, seeking adventure and relaxation every year. As a result, the local tourism industry has become a vital component of the local economy. Samaipata's demographic makeup consists of a combination of indigenous and mixed influences, giving visitors a glimpse into Bolivia's rich cultural diversity. Due to its designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, its strategic location as a gateway into the Amboro National Park, and the post-COVID tourism boom, the tourism industry in Samaipata has experienced significant growth in recent years. This influx of visitors has not only boosted economic development but has also accelerated change within the local economy and population. Due to this influx of tourism, the lesser-known town has turned into a well-known hub of backpackers and adventure, and has become an appealing destination for foreign migrants relocating to Bolivia from Western nations. Drawn by the allure of affordable living expenses and favorable weather conditions, a diaspora of Europeans and Americans now calls this town home, with its population steadily expanding each year.

Method

Mixed method, Phenomenological research. Based on the scope of our study, we take advantage of quantitative research methods to gain an overview of the different connections and correlations of labor segregation in the Bolivian workforce.

Moving from the macro (quantitative) to the micro (qualitative) view, we conducted semi-structured interviews, which included expert interviews and life story interviews. The qualitative research approach follows an extended case study design. Characterized by an in-depth, multifaceted investigation of a single phenomenon (Yin, 2018).

Sample

For our qualitative data collection, we approached employees and owners at tourist sites, hotels, and restaurants to gather insights on the experiences of women working in tourism in Samaipata. Following the interviews, we made use of their network to arrange further interviews; hence, fifteen participants were interviewed, twelve participants were female, and three were male.

Instruments

To explore the relationship between occupational segregation and economic empowerment, it utilized a cross-sectional Ordinary Least Square (OLS) model to first regress occupational segregation on the individual salary levels of male and female workers, and then on three forms of wage gaps.

To gain further insights, it conducted three in-depth, life-story interviews with a minimal interview guide to allow the interviewees to fully share their individual stories and experiences (Faraday & Plummer, 1979). The life story interviews focused on women working in the tourism sector, more precisely, the hospitality sector and activity-based tourism (e.g., tour guides) in Samaipata.

Results

Quantitative

To understand how gendered occupational segregation within the Bolivian tourism industry impacts female economic empowerment, we need to first outline general trends in the Bolivian labor market. Based on the Instituto Nacional de Estadística [INE] (2021) data, occupations continue to be highly segregated by gender. All of Bolivia's regions have relatively highly segregated labor markets. The most segregated labor market is found in Beni, while La Paz is the least. Contrary to most existing literature, our regression results suggest that in Bolivia, occupational segregation is associated with both an increase in female salaries and a decrease in the wage gap.

In terms of individual salaries, we find a highly significant positive association between occupational segregation and salaries. This is the case both with and without our added controls, albeit the control variables do weaken the impact. After controlling for factors such as age, job position, ethnicity, etc., it suggests that if occupational segregation increases by 1%, we expect a little over a 1% increase in both male and female logged salaries. When we change our outcome variable to gender pay gaps instead of individual salaries, we find that at the regional level, increasing occupational segregation leads to an expected minuscule decrease in the wage gap between men and women. However, this relationship is statistically insignificant once we add controls, meaning that we cannot conclude anything indefinitely.

In terms of the impact of the tourism sector on general salaries and the overall wage gap across all occupations, our results suggest that the size of the regional tourism sector has a slight positive impact on the salary level by itself. For the general gender pay gap, we find that the size of the tourism sector has a very minor but decreasing impact on the wage gap on its own, and furthermore, that a larger tourism sector would be expected to increase the strength of the relationship between occupational segregation and a decreasing gender pay gap.

Results show that when occupational segregation increases by 1 percentage point, the pay gap between men and women in tourism decreases by just over 0.01 percentage points, including controls. While the size of the tourism sector by itself does not have any significant impact on the wage gap between male and female tourism workers, our results indicate that, contrary to the impact on the overall gender wage gap, the size of the tourism sector does significantly strengthen the decrease between occupational segregation and the wage gap.

Here, we also find that while an increase in the size of the tourism sector would have a close to minuscule but increasing impact on the female-female gap by itself, the size of the tourism sector strengthens the decreasing association between occupational segregation and the female pay gap.

In sum, the findings indicate that the size of the regional tourism industry by itself has no impact on the male-female map pay gap for tourism employees, and only barely increases the female-female gap between non-tourism and tourism workers. However, the size of the tourism sector at the regional level does seem to strengthen the decreasing association we find between occupational segregation and tourism pay gaps. This mediating impact is much stronger for the male-female gap in the tourism sector than for the gap between female non-tourism and tourism workers.

Based on our results, we would like to highlight two main takeaways: First, there seems to be a positive relationship between gendered occupational segregation and the economic empowerment of women when we look only at salaries, while the overall gender gaps show no clear signs of the same. Second, it is important to note that while the findings contrast most existing literature on the effects of occupational segregation, some studies do find that segregation is not always associated with widening pay gaps and decreasing female salaries.

Qualitative

This paper uses insights into Samaipata's tourism industry and its experiences by women working in the sector. This includes an analysis of the interviews based on the psychological and social dimensions and linking them to the concepts of social capital, self-esteem, and self-efficacy, and the machismo model mentioned in the previous literature (Duffy et al., 2015).

Self-efficacy

The ability to make strategic decisions and the consciousness that enables women to overcome external barriers is an important aspect of female empowerment, as Andriani et al. (2022) work indicates.

Female business owners in Samaipata expressed that the sense of autonomy and control over their individual timetable gives them a sense of agency. The absence of hierarchical authority encourages their independence and decision-making abilities. The business owners were all outspoken about their independence and seemed self-confident, indicating a link between women's empowerment and women's entrepreneurship, as shown by Andriani et al. (2022). Related, we noticed that most female business owners either had a female role model or were part of a network of fellow business leaders.

In contrast to the experiences of female managers, we observed a lack of confidence among female employees in their ability to perform managerial tasks, which is associated with low self-efficacy (Andriani et al., 2022). If offered, the majority would turn down management positions, expressing concerns about not meeting the requirements, running into conflicts with friends at work, or working around the clock, which connects to an observation by Carvalho et al. (2019) that some organizations preferred men for positions that require greater availability.

Self-esteem

When conducting the interviews with the female workers in Samaipata, the sources from which some subjects drew their self-esteem were often as closely connected to their womanhood and local gender norms as they were to the rejection of those same norms.

Self-esteem can manifest in various ways across different female owners. In these cases, we come across examples of women with high confidence in their abilities, such as cooking, kindness, consciousness, and housekeeping. Another manner in which women's self-esteem and confidence grow is through financial and/or domestic independence obtained through their work.

A different example of the same sentiment, that being self-esteem and confidence in the workplace through means that aren't tied to traditional gender roles, can also be found when talking about empowerment in the workplace.

Therefore, it becomes apparent that the women in the tourism sector in Samaipata drew their self-esteem and confidence from more than just one source. While some may feel more confident and self-efficacious due to traits and abilities they possess, which are typically attributed to women through local gender norms, others may well get those same feelings from their decline of these gendered attributes, such as increased independence and confidence in managerial abilities.

Cognitive Social Capital

As proven by different studies, stereotypes continue to play a big role in the professional opportunities available to women (Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). We thereby explored whether gender norms such as machismo are prevalent in Samaipata and shape the decisions and aspirations of women in its tourism industry. When asked about proper management attributes, many female employees mentioned rather masculine features, such as ordering around and delegating tasks. Research demonstrates that women continue to be viewed as less effective leaders, and men are viewed as better suited for decision-making tasks (Dickerson & Taylor, 2000).

These internalized beliefs shape expectations and allow for male attitudes to be intensified as the norm, leading to the reality of women being mainly present in lower-paid service jobs instead of working in management. Past research suggested that women should change their behavior to become 'more like men' to be successful in managerial positions (Hennig & Jardim, 1977). Female attributes were seen as less fit for management because of persistent traditional gender roles, also known as the glass ceiling phenomenon, which is an invisible barrier that women who aim to climb the hierarchical ladder or work in atypical positions face (Carvalho et al., 2019).

Structural Social Capital

Building on the social capital theory, which views networks as a resource and subject to solidarity and identity, the field research revealed a high desire for interaction and friendship as a reason for their choice of occupation.

Our findings revealed that social connections influence the decisions of women to work in the tourism sector in Samaipata. Corroborating with the social capital theory, statements

about being offered or coming in contact with jobs through social connections emerged repeatedly, showing the positive consequences of sociability and the power of being part of a network in Samaipata.

Hence, on the one side, female workers in Samaipata made use of their network to secure a job. Conversely, their decision to work in the tourism industry was motivated by the social aspects and global reach.

Conclusion

The exploration of female (dis)empowerment within Samaipata's tourism sector unveils nuances in terms of both challenges and prospects. Our quantitative results reveal that when the tourism industry is large, and women make up most of it, both the pay gap between men and women working in tourism, and the pay gap between women working outside of the tourism industry and those working within it diminish. This indicates that in Bolivia, the tourism industry may, in some cases, be associated with increasing female economic empowerment, but primarily in regions where the tourism sector is already well-developed.

In line with this, our qualitative results also show that the tourism industry empowers many of our interviewed women through improved self-esteem and self-efficacy. Working in the tourism industry expanded their confidence in their abilities and their independence. Networks and friendships were also found to be key motivating factors for women working in the industry, as they not only strengthen their sense of community but also widen their job opportunities. Finally, our findings suggest that gender norms play an important role in shaping female experiences. Economic progress can hurt female empowerment, e.g., time constraints due to having to do both domestic household work and work outside of the house. However, we find that some women gain more self-confidence in doing traditional gendered tasks, while others find strength in defying them. In summary, the study sheds light on how the tourism sector in Samaipata contributes to self-esteem, self-efficacy, and social capital among female business owners and workers, which fosters a sense of empowerment.

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