

Women Participation in Rural Tourism: The Case of Heeloya in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Women's participation in rural tourism plays a vital role in strengthening local economies, preserving cultural heritage, and evolving gender equality. In Sri Lanka, female engagement in this sector remains constrained, particularly in rural settings. This study examines the roles, lived experiences, and challenges faced by women involved in rural tourism in the village of Heeloya, a community renowned for its agro-tourism and cultural tourism initiatives. By using a qualitative phenomenological approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposively selected sample of 06 women and 02 men actively engaged in tourism-related activities, 02 government officers, and 04 women and 02 men not involved in rural tourism in Heeloya. Data were collected in June 2024 to capture contemporary experiences and seasonal tourism trends. Findings reveal that women contribute across multiple scopes, including tour guiding, providing homestays, preparing traditional food and beverages, offering agricultural support for tourism experiences, producing handicrafts, and participating in cultural performances. These roles have enhanced household income, strengthened community cohesion, promoted cultural continuity, and raised personal empowerment. The study also uncovers barriers such as limited financial resources, gendered social norms, inadequate skills training, insufficient infrastructural support, and a lack of family support. In several instances, these constraints have resulted in women withdrawing from tourism-related work, thereby diminishing both economic and socio-cultural gains. The study highlights the importance of targeted skill development initiatives, gender-sensitive policies, adequate funding, and community awareness initiatives in creating an enabling environment for women's sustained participation in rural tourism. By addressing these challenges, rural tourism in Heeloya can serve as a model for inclusive and sustainable development, driving economic vitality, preserving cultural identity, and promoting gender equity.

Keywords: Heeloya, rural tourism, Sri Lanka women's participation, women's empowerment