



Gheorghe Zane Institute for Economic and Social Research

Economy and Contemporary Society

Journal homepage: ecs-journal.ro



Empirical Article

The Role of Women in the Sustainable Tourism Economy: Insights from Türkiye's “Future is in Tourism” Project¹

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 9 June 2025

Revised 2 July 2025

Accepted 30 October 2025

First published online 25 November 2025

JEL classification:

L83; J2; Z3

Keywords:

Tourism

Tourism economics

Employment

Sustainable tourism

ABSTRACT

Tourism is one of the sectors where sustainable development activities are becoming a priority as sustainable development becomes a global agenda. Tourism, one of the fastest growing industries in the world, has a significant impact on economic growth and development, as well as on the environment and socio-cultural structure. Sustainable development goals cannot be achieved without acknowledging the important role of women. Women's employment in the tourism sector is an important issue, and many studies addressing women's employment can be found in the literature. However, the place of women in the sustainable tourism economy should be evaluated from a broad perspective. This study aims to determine women's role and involvement in the development of the sustainable tourism economy in Türkiye and to understand how Turkish women the main drivers of cultural and environmental preservation in the country are. The study employs a qualitative approach based on a literature review, utilizing both primary and secondary sources. Turkish women have a vital role in the preservation of culture and the environment in Türkiye. In this context, the Future is in Tourism project, which is one of the prominent initiatives in sustainable women's employment in Türkiye, is evaluated to reveal its contributions to enhancing women's place in the economy. In addition to the literature-based

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findings, semi-structured interviews were conducted with women actively involved in the project to gain in-depth insight into their lived experiences and perspectives.

1. Introduction

Sustainable development has become a central issue on the global agenda, encompassing not only environmental concerns but also economic and social dimensions (UNWTO, 2023). In this context, the tourism sector stands out as one of the fields where sustainability is most prominently discussed, due to its significant contributions to economic growth as well as its cultural and environmental impacts (Sharpley, 2009; Gössling & Hall, 2019). Tourism plays a vital role in empowering local communities and protecting natural and cultural assets (Scheyvens, 1999).

Within the vision of sustainable tourism, the role of women constitutes one of the fundamental building blocks of this transformation. Women's labor plays a determining role in preserving local culture, transmitting traditional knowledge, and promoting environmental awareness (UN Women, n.d.). However, the position of women in the sustainable tourism economy should be addressed with a holistic perspective, as their contributions go beyond mere employment statistics. Their participation, visibility, and influence in decision-making processes require in-depth analysis (Ferguson, 2010; Tucker & Boonabaana, 2012).

This study aims to examine the role of women in the sustainable tourism economy in Türkiye from a multidimensional perspective. It highlights how Turkish women contribute significantly to the preservation of cultural heritage and environmental sustainability. Furthermore, the paper evaluates initiatives such as the Future is in Tourism project, which promotes women's employment in sustainable tourism in Türkiye, and analyzes how such initiatives enhance women's position in the economy (UNDP Türkiye, 2023). Employing a qualitative method based on a literature review, the study draws from both primary and secondary sources to provide a comprehensive framework on the involvement of women in tourism. In addition to the literature-based exploration, semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face and via online platforms with women actively involved in the Future is in Tourism project, allowing for a deeper understanding of their personal experiences and contributions within the context of sustainable tourism.

2. Literature Review

In order to understand the multifaceted role of women in the development of a sustainable tourism economy, it is essential to examine the existing body of literature that addresses the intersections of gender, sustainability, and tourism. Aylan,

Gökdoğan, and Şalvarcı (2019) emphasize the importance of policies supporting women's employment in enabling underdeveloped regions to benefit from the tourism sector, noting that women's entrepreneurial activities contribute significantly to rural development and poverty reduction. Similarly, Özhan Irgat (2023) explores the relationship between community-based tourism, local development, and women's empowerment, highlighting how women entrepreneurs contribute to the regional economy through the promotion and sale of local products. Kayan Örgün and Bulut (2019) analyze the role of governmental support in fostering rural tourism, showing that such support enhances women's economic and social participation, thereby contributing to regional development and sustainability. Ak (2021), through a comparative analysis of selected OECD countries and Türkiye, identifies women's work as a critical asset for sustainable economic growth and emphasizes the importance of removing barriers to employment. Bıyıklı (2015) discusses the challenges women face in the tourism sector, such as discrimination in promotion and hiring, and argues that addressing these issues can make the sector more inclusive and socially sustainable. Within this context, one of the most prominent examples of sustainable female employment is the Future is in Tourism project. Implemented across Türkiye, this initiative encourages women to take active roles in tourism-based local development projects and contributes to their economic, social, and cultural empowerment (Future is in Tourism, n.d.).

The Future is in Tourism project is a pioneering social responsibility initiative in the field of sustainable tourism in Türkiye, launched in 2007. The project is carried out in partnership with the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of Türkiye, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and Anadolu Efes. It aims to support local development, preserve natural and cultural heritage, and ensure that local communities benefit economically from tourism. By leveraging sustainable tourism as a tool for development, the project primarily focuses on creating socio-economic benefits in rural areas.

The Future is in Tourism project supports practical tourism projects that promote the active participation of local communities and foster the economic inclusion of women and youth. Through open calls for proposals, local tourism initiatives from across Türkiye are evaluated, and those deemed viable are provided with financial support, technical assistance, and mentorship. Supported initiatives include ecotourism, cultural tourism, gastronomy tourism, handicrafts, and nature-based activities.

One of the project's core principles is the integration of a destination's unique values into tourism activities, while ensuring their preservation. In this regard,

training programs, capacity building, and infrastructure improvements aimed at enhancing the quality of life for local residents are also key components of the initiative. The Future is in Tourism project places particular emphasis on environmental sensitivity, gender equality, and the preservation of cultural heritage, all aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

To date, more than 20 local tourism projects have been supported across Türkiye, generating direct income and employment for hundreds of individuals (Future is in Tourism, n.d.). The project serves as a significant model for promoting awareness of sustainable tourism in Türkiye and disseminating best practices nationwide.

3. Methodology

This study aims to examine the contributions of women to the tourism economy through their participation in sustainable tourism-oriented development projects. The research specifically focuses on the experiences of women who have participated in projects implemented within the scope of the Future is in Tourism project in Türkiye.

The population of the study consists of women who have participated in the Future is in Tourism projects, worked within these initiatives, or benefited from them. Purposive sampling and convenience sampling techniques were used as the sampling methods. According to Yıldırım and Şimşek (2021), purposive sampling is often preferred when it is necessary to obtain in-depth information from individuals who are knowledgeable about the subject being studied.

Within the scope of the study, interviews were conducted with seven women who have been actively involved in the Future is in Tourism projects. A semi-structured interview technique was employed as the data collection tool. Designed as an exploratory study, the research employed a semi-structured interview form consisting of five open-ended questions for the data collection process. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and via Zoom.

The collected data were analyzed using the descriptive analysis method. Descriptive analysis is a type of qualitative data analysis based on summarizing and interpreting data obtained through various data collection techniques according to predetermined themes. According to Yıldırım and Şimşek (2021), the main goal of descriptive analysis is to present the findings in a summarized, clear, and interpretative manner to the reader.

4. Results and Discussion

All participants hold at least a bachelor's degree and come from diverse professional backgrounds, including photography, teaching, entrepreneurship, homemaking, and academia. Their age range is between 30 and 40 years old. Within the scope of this study, significant findings were obtained regarding the role of women in sustainable tourism and the contributions of projects to regional development through interviews conducted with seven women involved in the Future is in Tourism project.

All participants agreed that women play an important role in sustainable tourism. They emphasized that women are actively involved in preserving local culture, the sustainable use of natural resources, and strengthening the social dimensions of tourism. One participant (P3) stated, "As women, we both preserve our local culture and lead tourism activities in harmony with nature. Our contribution to sustainable tourism is immense." Another participant (P1) added, "Increasing the visibility of women in this field is also an important step towards gender equality." The participation of women in the project was highlighted as critical not only for economic reasons but also for social development.

The activities carried out within the projects were reported to provide economic benefits to the region, particularly by increasing income through the promotion and marketing of local products. One woman (P7) noted, "Thanks to the project, we can promote our local products to wider audiences, which has greatly contributed to our family income." Another participant (P6) shared, "Through these efforts, awareness of sustainability has grown, and we have become more sensitive about protecting our environment." Participants stated that such projects significantly contribute to the social and economic development of the local community, especially women. Women's increased participation in the workforce enhanced their self-confidence, enabled them to acquire new knowledge and skills, and made them more active in social life. One participant (P6) said, "I used to have difficulty expressing myself, but during the project, my confidence grew, and now I participate in decision-making processes." Another (P5) emphasized, "Women's development means the development of the entire society."

When evaluating themselves before and after the project, the women reported considerable improvements in self-confidence, knowledge, and skills. One participant (P3) said, "Thanks to the trainings, I learned a lot about tourism and sustainability, and I apply this knowledge in my work." Another (P4) added, "Before the project, I was shy and had little knowledge; now I am more assertive and handle my tasks more consciously." Training programs, especially on sustainable tourism

and entrepreneurship, were said to equip them with the necessary competencies and facilitated their active roles within the project. One participant (P1) emphasized, “The training I received on sustainable tourism and entrepreneurship helped me to be more effective in the project,” highlighting the importance of education in empowering women.

Taking part in the project positively influenced the participants' future plans. Many women expressed their intention to participate in more projects and to take a more active role in the field of sustainable tourism with the experience they gained. One participant (P2) said, “Being involved in this project gave me the courage to undertake bigger tasks in the future.” Another (P4) added, “I now want to play a more active role in the tourism sector.”

To enable women's more active participation in such projects, the common view was that financial support as well as education, mentoring, and social support mechanisms need to be developed. Participants emphasized the importance of raising social awareness and supporting women's economic independence. One participant (P2) stated, “Financial support alone is not enough for women's empowerment; education and guidance are also necessary.” Another woman (P7) said, “There must be a social consciousness supporting women's success so that more women can participate in projects.”

One participant (P3) shared particularly detailed insights, explaining that through this project, they truly learned the meaning of sustainable tourism. She emphasized that increasing women's employment is not limited to working in tourism enterprises but also includes the important role women play in producing region-specific handicrafts. She noted, “Thanks to this project, we understood what sustainable tourism really means. Increasing women's employment is not just about working in tourism businesses; it also means making meaningful products while caring for our families, contributing economically from home.” She further explained the cultural and economic significance of these activities: “By doing this, we offer visitors gifts that reflect our culture. This is not only a source of income for us but also a way to preserve and share our heritage. Supporting our families while contributing economically and culturally is very valuable to us. Women's active participation in the local economy means empowerment.”

These insights demonstrate that sustainable tourism projects create a harmonious balance between preserving cultural identity, supporting family life, and strengthening women's economic independence. This approach not only increases women's employment but also enhances the promotion of authentic local products and enriches visitor experiences, thereby boosting the regional economy.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that women play a critical role in sustainable tourism and contribute significantly to regional development. Participants emphasized that their contributions extend beyond employment in tourism businesses, including producing local crafts and souvenirs, which support both cultural preservation and local economies.

Participation in the Future is in Tourism project also led to individual gains, such as increased self-confidence, knowledge, and skills. Women reported that training programs on sustainable tourism and entrepreneurship enabled them to take more active roles within the project and enhanced their social and professional competencies.

These observations align with the broader understanding that empowering women in tourism projects not only strengthens economic outcomes but also promotes social empowerment and community engagement. Participants highlighted the importance of integrating women into decision-making processes, supporting local culture, and providing financial and social resources to overcome barriers. Overall, the discussion shows that sustainable tourism initiatives can be effective platforms for fostering women's active participation, economic independence, and social empowerment.

Based on the interviews and literature review conducted within the scope of this study, it is evident that women play a critical role in sustainable tourism and contribute significantly to regional development in multiple dimensions. Participants emphasized that women's contributions extend beyond employment in tourism businesses and include activities such as producing local crafts and souvenirs that reflect cultural heritage. These findings align with the literature that highlights women's involvement in sustainable tourism as essential for both economic and social sustainability (Moreno Alarcón & Cole, 2019; Sharpley & Telfer, 2014; Scheyvens, 2000).

Participation in such projects has also led to individual gains for women, including increased self-confidence, knowledge, and skills. This suggests that women's integration into the economic sphere is closely linked to broader processes of social empowerment (UNWTO, 2019). Moreover, the contribution of women to the local economy underscores the importance of enhancing female employment in rural areas in line with sustainable development goals (ILO, 2017). Based on these findings and from our observations, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Education and Capacity-Building Programs for Women: Regular training programs in sustainable tourism and entrepreneurship should be offered to enhance

women's competencies. This would empower them to take more active roles in projects and strengthen their positions in the business world (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2021). Taking steps in this regard by local administrations, particularly by providing educational and professional training courses for women living in tourist regions, will strengthen their position in the tourism sector and enable them to contribute more effectively to sustainable tourism.

- **Development of Financial and Social Support Mechanisms:** To increase women's participation in tourism and related projects, microcredit, grant programs, and mentorship opportunities should be expanded. Additionally, awareness-raising campaigns should be conducted to promote social support for women's success (World Bank, 2018). Based on our observations, combining these financial and social support mechanisms with locally tailored initiatives can significantly enhance women's engagement and sustainability in the sector. Without addressing the specific cultural and regional barriers women face, such programs may fall short of their full potential.

- **Support for Local Culture and Female-Led Production:** Platforms should be established to market and promote products made by women, which would not only diversify their income sources but also help preserve the region's cultural heritage (Scheyvens, 2000). Creating such platforms is essential for empowering women while raising their economic status and protecting local traditions. Women who participate in these types of activities will strengthen themselves economically, socially, and psychologically.

- **Inclusion of Women in Decision-Making Mechanisms:** Women should be actively involved in tourism planning and management processes to ensure that sustainability policies incorporate a gender-sensitive perspective (UNWTO, 2019). The meaning of participation is critical. Meaningful participation requires not only presence but also empowerment. Women should be able to effectively influence decisions, protect, critique, and advocate for their communities' needs.

In conclusion, the active and effective participation of women in sustainable tourism projects is vital not only for economic development but also for social transformation and cultural sustainability. Empowering women should be considered a central pillar of sustainable tourism and prioritized by policymakers.

5.1. Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research was conducted with a small sample consisting of only seven women who participated in the Future is in Tourism projects. Although purposive and

convenience sampling methods were chosen to obtain in-depth qualitative data, the limited number of participants restricts the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. Additionally, the data collection process relied on semi-structured interviews conducted face-to-face and via online platforms, which may have influenced participants' responses due to contextual or environmental factors. As a qualitative approach was adopted, the findings reflect the subjective experiences and perceptions of the selected participants. For these reasons, future studies with larger and more diverse samples, supported by quantitative data collection methods, would provide a more comprehensive understanding and allow stronger generalizations regarding women's contributions to the tourism economy.

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